gameinformer®
THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

GROUNDED

Obsidian Shrunk The Kids In This Thrilling Backyard Adventure

PROS ALWAYS WIN THE DAY

NEW MORE POWERFUL BENEFITS ARE HERE

THE RANKS OF THE LEGENDARY POWER UP REWARDS PROGRAM GIVES YOU AN ARSENAL OF SAVINGS!

Don’t let your **$5 monthly Reward Certificate** burn a hole in your pocket – it can be redeemed toward new and pre-owned games, accessories, collectibles and more at GameStop.*

That’s in addition to all the other great benefits **Pro members** receive.

SELECT YOUR MEMBERSHIP

	PLAYER FREE	PRO $19.99/YR
NEW! $5 MONTHLY REWARD CERTIFICATE: $60 ANNUALLY		●
NEW! EXCLUSIVE OFFERS AND EVENTS		●
NEW! $5 REWARD CERTIFICATE WELCOME GIFT		●
POINTS FOR EVERY DOLLAR SPENT**	10	20
10% EXTRA TRADE CREDIT ON GAMES, ACCESSORIES & TECH		●
PHYSICAL SUBSCRIPTION TO *GAME INFORMER* MAGAZINE		●
DIGITAL SUBSCRIPTION TO *GAME INFORMER* MAGAZINE		-$5/YR

Enroll or renew today at your favorite GameStop store, or on **www.gamestop.com**

GameStop
POWERUP
REWARDS™

*Excluding purchases of select gift cards and digital cards. **Excluding purchases of GameStop gift cards.

Quarantine Love From GI

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Follow me on Twitter
@TheRealAndyMc

COVID-19 has changed the world, and no one knows what the long-term effects will be. But in the present, there are heroes out there who are still working essential jobs in the face of adversity. Others are working from home, doing their best to flatten the curve so we can get out of this and get back to normal life.

Game Informer is part of the latter group, and during these strange times, our priority is to continue bringing you the best content we can. Humbly, of course, because games aren't essential – but they certainly make my life (and the lives of many others) better. We think games are a great way to escape and find joy during difficult times, which is an important role in this challenge for the world and life in general.

We hope this issue helps you find happiness in talking about and celebrating games, and that you find something to look forward to on the other side of this mess. In the meantime, you can still find all of our regular print and online offerings, including features, previews, reviews, and video content. It's all just delivered from home for now, with all the love we can share. Our community is the reason we exist, so thank you for reading.

Stay safe, everyone.

Cheers,

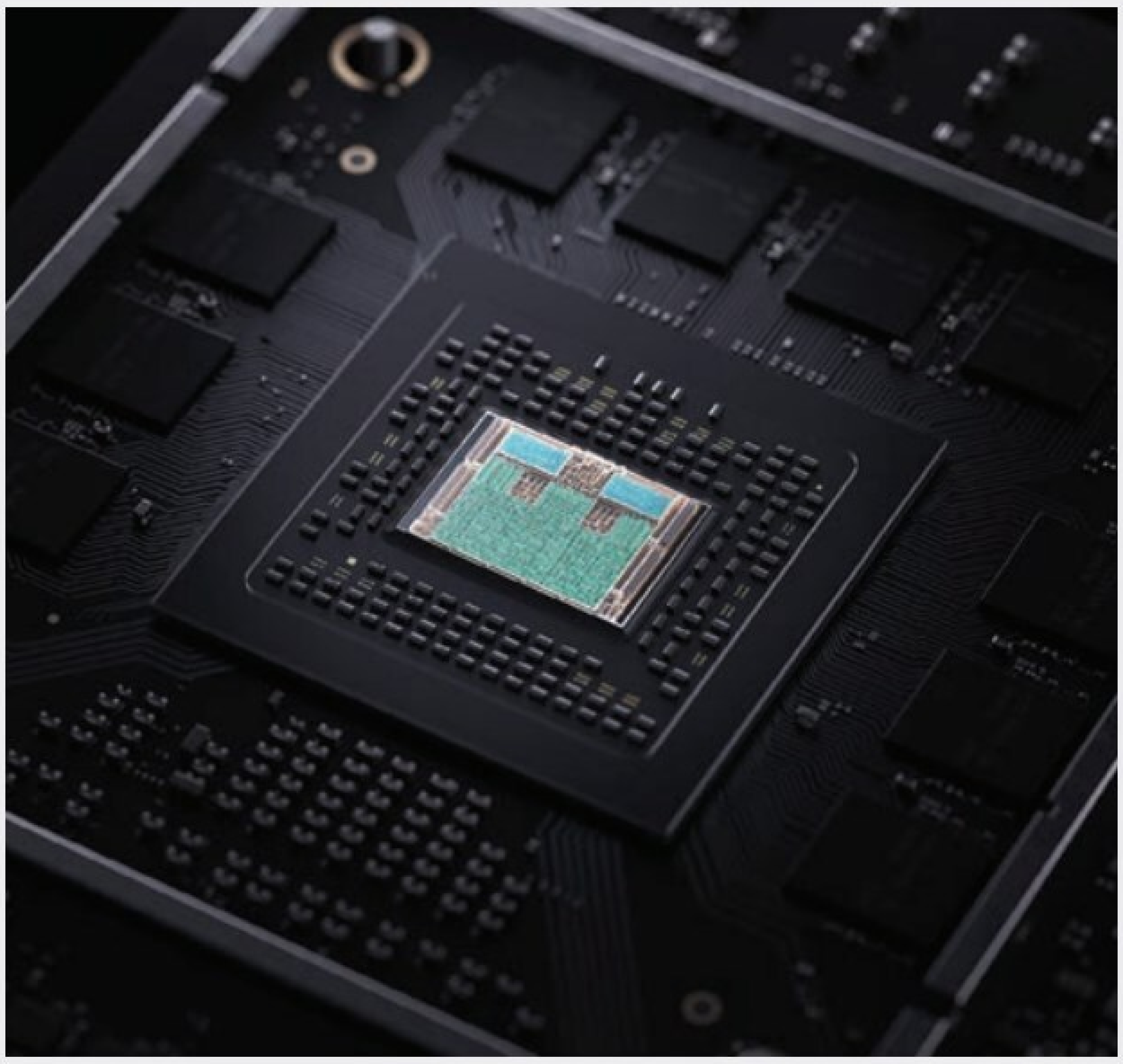
Andy

Game Informer Subscription Update

Game Informer made a decision this year to reduce the magazine's frequency from 12 issues per year to 10. As part of this change, Game Informer updated its delivery dates to make sure that you, our readers, are getting the most up-to-date information as possible. The rule of thumb is that we now launch an issue every five weeks, instead of four. To make this transition easier, we created gameinformer.com/issuedates and added the digital launch dates to our masthead at the back of the issue. If you have any questions or concerns about how this affects your subscription, please send them to customerservice@gameinformer.com.

28 Grounded

Obsidian is known for creating memorable RPGs, such as the Pillars of Eternity series and The Outer Worlds. A small team within the studio is breaking the mold with an all-new survival game, Grounded. We visited the team (virtually, at least) to bring you the big details on this micro-scaled adventure. ***by Jeff Cork***



10 **Comparing The Xbox Series X & PlayStation 5 So Far**
The consoles' specs are out, giving us a clearer look at their approaches to game development.

14 **Opinion: The Battle Pass Is The New Lootbox**
Lootboxes are villainized, but is the Battle Pass a better solution?

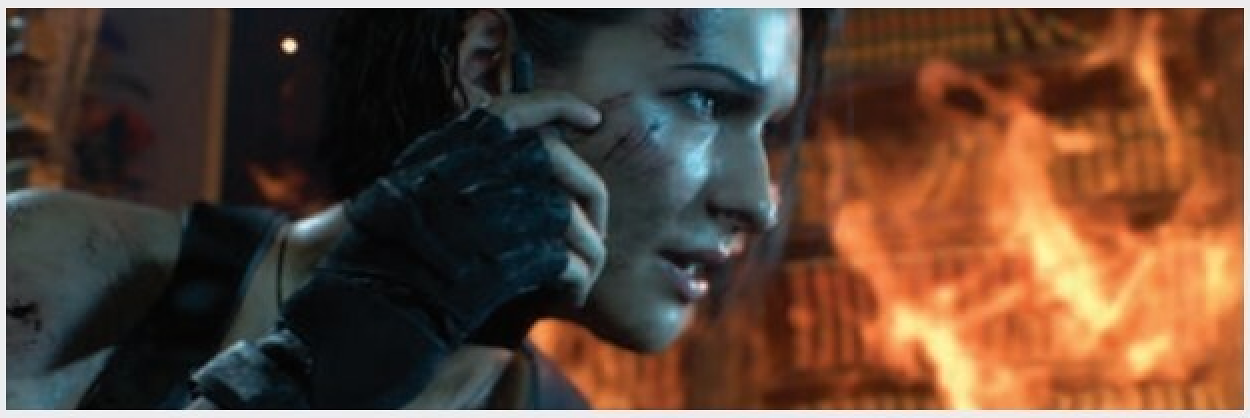
16 **Navigating Anxiety In Quarantine With Simulation Games**
Something to help in these strange times.

06 **Feedback**
18 **The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly**
22 **Top Ten Townspeople**
24 **Gear: Streaming Tech, Desk Toys, Tabletop RPGs**
64 **Reviews**
84 **Game Over**

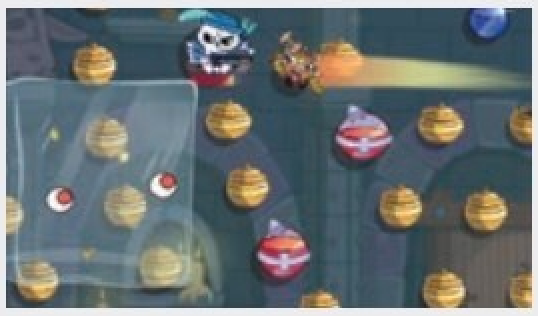
20 **Gamer: Stephan Reese**
Collecting artifacts from the pages of *Nintendo Power*.

42 **Future Prospects: 60 Games We Can't Wait To Play**
No matter your taste, there's something to get excited about.

66 **Doom Eternal**
Id Software delivers a booming sequel to the 2016 title with more than enough firepower.



68 **Resident Evil 3**
A remake that improves the original title beyond just a graphical update.



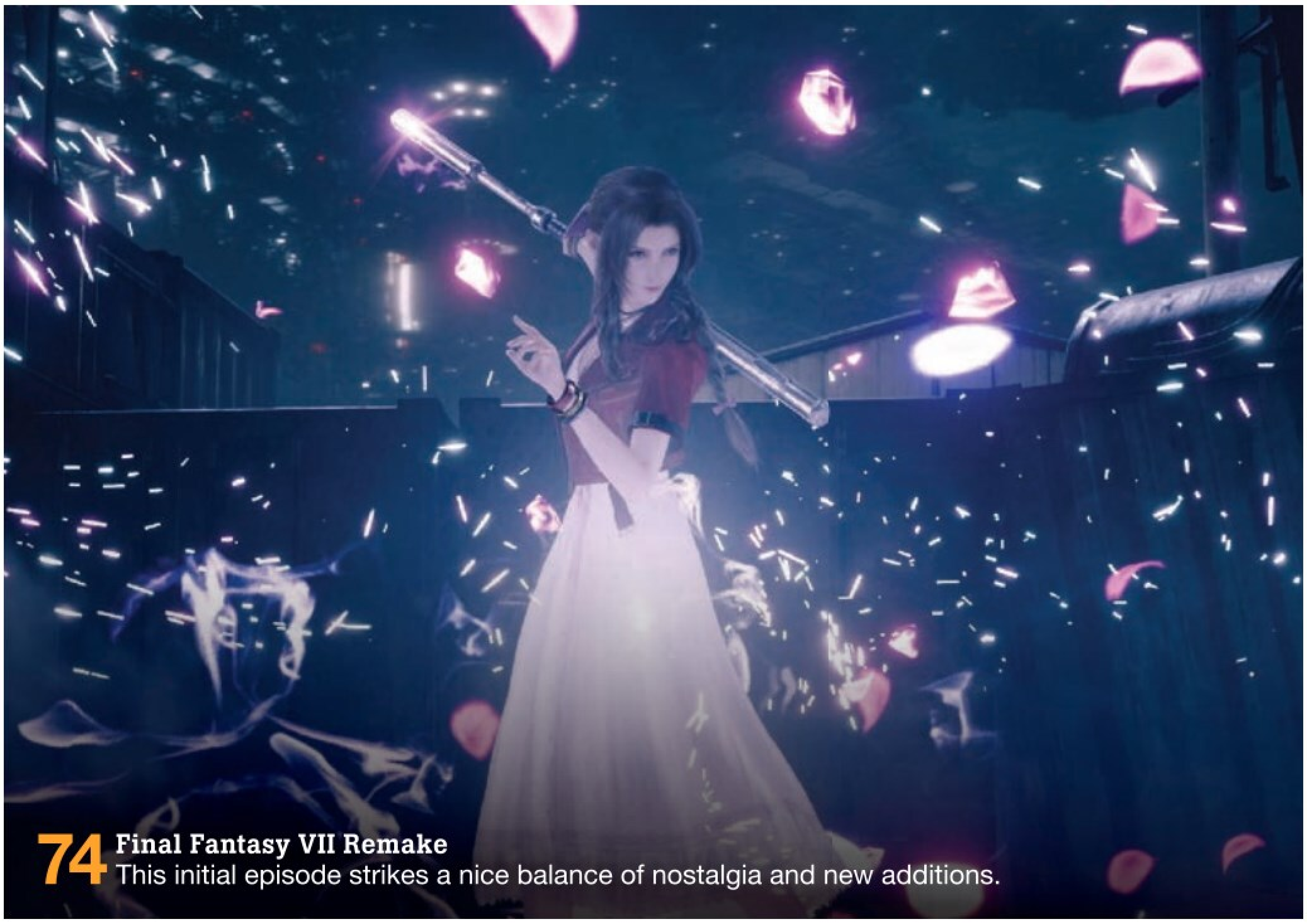
70 **Roundguard**
This Peggle-as-an-RPG is more of a novel smash-up than it may sound.

71 **Bleeding Edge**
Ninja Theory's fighter comes out flat.

72 Call Of Duty: Warzone
The series' take on battle royale is a worthy addition to CoD's wealth of modes.

73 Treachery In Beatdown City
An attempt at mashing a side-scrolling fighter with RPG combat that runs out of gas.

76 MLB The Show 20
From gameplay to engrossing modes, it's another strong entry in the series.



74 Final Fantasy VII Remake
This initial episode strikes a nice balance of nostalgia and new additions.

77 Persona 5 Royal
This isn't just another version of the 2017 RPG – it's the best way to play the game.

78 Animal Crossing: New Horizons
Have fun and make your island what you want to be.

80 Half-Life: Alyx
A stellar entry for both VR gaming and the beloved franchise.

81 The Room VR: A Dark Matter
The puzzle series works great in VR.

games index

12 Minutes . . . 57
Amnesia: Rebirth . . . 48
Animal Crossing: New Horizons . . . 78
Axiom Verge 2 . . . 47
Babylon's Fall . . . 45
Baldur's Gate III . . . 44
Bayonetta 3 . . . 44
Beyond Good & Evil 2 . . . 47
Biomutant . . . 54
Bleeding Edge . . . 71
Bravely Default II . . . 57
Call of Duty: Warzone . . . 72
Curse of the Dead Gods . . . 50
Cyberpunk 2077 . . . 46
Darkest Dungeon 2 . . . 57
Deadly Premonition 2: A Blessing in Disguise . . . 57
Deathloop . . . 47
Diablo IV . . . 45
Disintegration . . . 48
Doom Eternal . . . 66
Dying Light 2 . . . 51
Elden Ring . . . 49
Elder Scrolls VI, The . . . 44
Empire of Sin . . . 62
Fast & Furious Crossroads . . . 59
Final Fantasy VII Remake . . . 74
Fold Apart, A . . . 82
Fuser . . . 58
Ghost of Tsushima . . . 56
Ghostwire: Tokyo . . . 47
Godfall . . . 48
Gods and Monsters . . . 50
Granblue Fantasy: Versus . . . 82
Griftlands . . . 54
Grounded . . . 28
Half-Life: Alyx . . . 80
Halo Infinite . . . 50
Hollow Knight: Silksong . . . 45
Hytale . . . 58
In Other Waters . . . 82
Iron Man VR . . . 59
Last of Us Part II, The . . . 53
Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild Sequel, The . . . 44
Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga . . 59
Magic: Legends . . . 62
Maneater . . . 54
Marvel's Avengers . . . 61
Metroid Prime 4 . . . 44
Microsoft Flight Simulator . . . 52
Minecraft Dungeons . . . 49
MLB The Show 20 . . . 76
No More Heroes 3 . . . 52
Oddworld Soulstorm . . . 51
Outriders . . . 60
Overwatch 2 . . . 63
Path of Exile 2 . . . 61
Persona 5 Royal . . . 77
Psychonauts 2 . . . 51
Rainbow Six Quarantine . . . 59
Resident Evil 3 . . . 68
Rogue Heroes: Ruins of Tasos . . . 60
Room VR: A Dark Matter, The . . . 81
Roundguard . . . 70
Sable . . . 52
Sea of Stars . . . 55
Spelunky 2 . . . 55
Spiritfarer . . . 55
Starfield . . . 50
Torchlight III . . . 61
Treachery In Beatdown City . . . 73
Valorant . . . 58
Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2 . . . 62
Wasteland 3 . . . 52
Watch Dogs: Legion . . . 60
Witchbrook . . . 62
Yakuza: Like a Dragon . . . 49
Yes, Your Grace . . . 83

SINCE 1828

COURVOISIER

REAL POWER LIES IN YOUR ABILITY TO ELEVATE OTHERS.

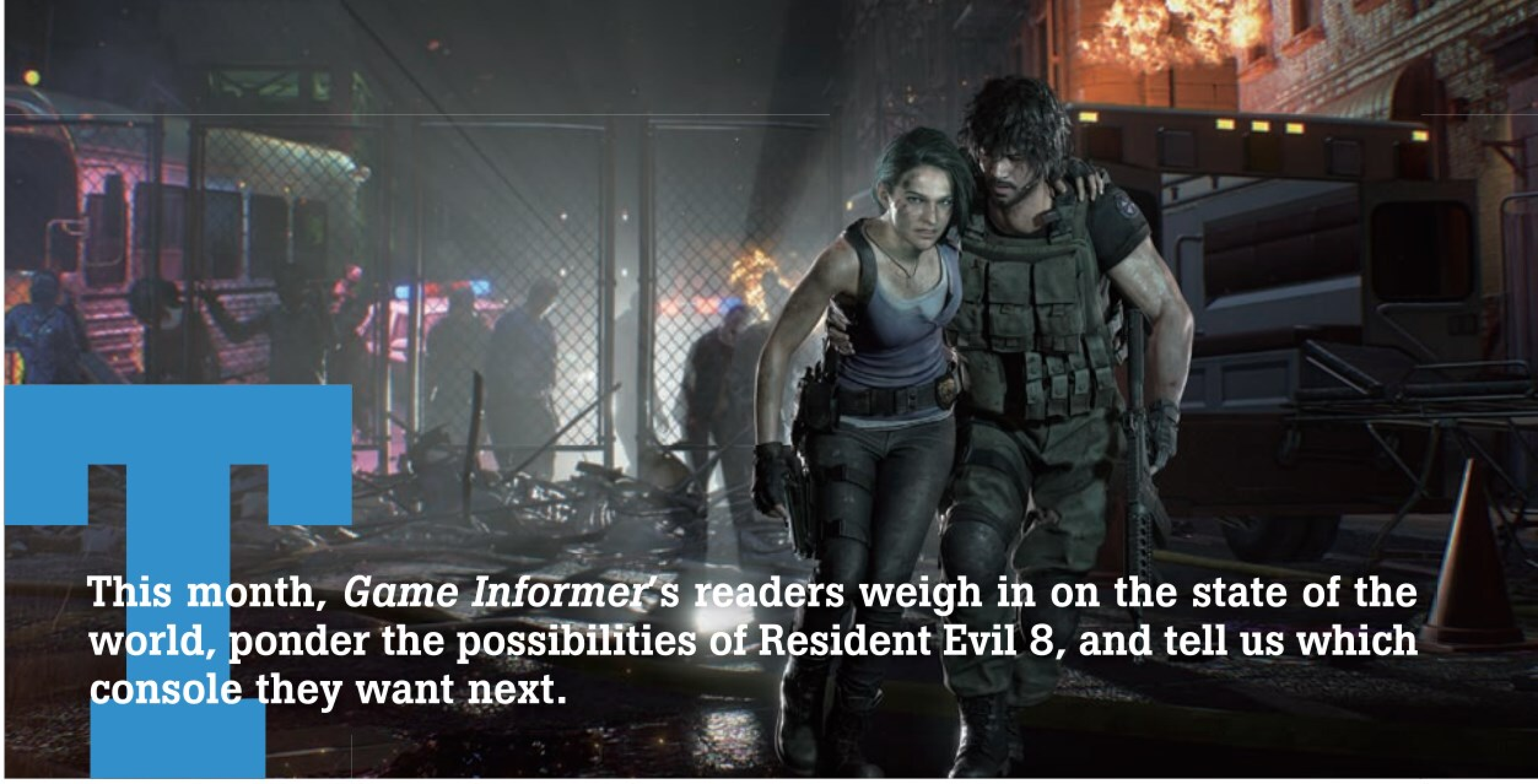
PUSHA T, MAISON COURVOISIER CURATOR

EXPERIENCETHEMAISON.COM

COURVOISIER
COGNAC
V·S

HONOR YOUR CODE

PLEASE ENJOY RESPONSIBLY. Courvoisier® Cognac, 40% alc./vol.
Courvoisier Import Company, Chicago, IL USA. ©2020 Courvoisier S.A.S.



This month, *Game Informer*'s readers weigh in on the state of the world, ponder the possibilities of Resident Evil 8, and tell us which console they want next.

Gaming During the Pandemic

To my *Game Informer* friends, I hope you are safe during this tragic time. The pandemic has upended my life, and I now find myself wondering if I will be employed much longer. I'm a bartender at a restaurant in Ohio, which was forced to close until conditions improve. They told me they could pay me for one more week and that's it. I have no idea what I'm going to do. I'm losing sleep over this. Video games have been a great stress reliever. I've spent a lot of time with friends in Call of Duty: Warzone over the last few days. When I'm with them it's like the pandemic isn't here. We're having fun. Thank you for all you do at *Game Informer*, and thank you to the game makers out there for all of the games. I hope by the time your readers see this, the pandemic is over and life returns to normal, but if not, take care of yourselves and enjoy the games.

Sabrina Clark
via email

As I sit here writing this thing, the COVID-19 virus is spreading like wildfire, schools are being closed, and people are being ordered to shelter. A lot of these people are going to need something to do and some will be logging in to their favorite console or PC (shudder). A lot of these people are going to be concerned and scared for themselves and their families. The last thing they want to hear are insults about them, their gameplay, or their mothers. They will need the interaction and connection the video games can give them so they can (try to) forgot about things for a bit and have some social interaction. I'd like to see people be kind and supportive to one another and just be nice. We could all use it. Hopefully things are better if you print this.

Ben Shields
New Jersey

I think I have coronavirus. I called my doctor and they told me to not come to the clinic since they wouldn't be able to test me. I have a cough. Shortness of breath. Feel weak. I'm 22 years old so I'm not stressing it too much, and I am feeling better each day, but I'm more worried about my stress. I can't shake the feeling this is the end of the world as we know it. Life will change after this. I'm finding some escapism in Breath of Fire II and Final Fantasy XIII, but would really like an RPG that doesn't focus on the end of the world or war. Any suggestions?

Todd Holmes
Dallas, TX

Hey, GI! I've been quarantined in my house for a week, and have watched plenty of movies and shows on Netflix, but the most fun I've had is watching Super Replay episodes. Please make more after the virus is gone.

Jim
via email

As of this writing, the *Game Informer* crew is quarantined in their homes, making the magazine and video shows remotely. As a society, we are in uncharted territory with the pandemic forcing us to change how we live. If we all do our part, we should be able to get through this and return to life as we know and love it. Video games and other forms of entertainment are helping us get through these difficult times. We have nearly unlimited amounts of entertainment at our fingertips. We just have to click on something and we can enjoy it. Jim, if we get the chance, we will make a Super Replay just for you when this is all over. And Todd, if you are into sports, Golf Story on Switch is a fantastic RPG without violence.

Resident Evil 3

I just got done reading your Resident Evil 3 Remake issue and I started to reminisce about [Resident Evil] 7 and how thankful I am that Capcom finally went back to their classic survival horror roots. I remember how "iffy" I felt about the first-person direction they took. After knowing how their last few games felt like any other random third-person shooter, I thought they were just going to go full Call of Duty at that point, but I have never been so glad to have been proven wrong in my life. RE7 is easily my favorite survival-horror game and with news that they are possibly developing the 8th game, do you guys think that they will stick with 7's first-person formula or follow the remakes' third-person camera?

Philip Banks
Chicago, Illinois

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Capcom isn't afraid to shake up Resident Evil's formula, and seeing that we just got two classically designed entries with the remakes of Resident Evil 2 and 3, we have a feeling the next entry will likely be different, either building upon Resident Evil 7's first-person experience or exploring a different idea altogether. On the note of trying new things, what would an open-world Resident Evil be like?

Game Infarcer

Thank you guys SO much for the hilarious *Game Infarcer* this year! Every year it gets better and better, but I do have one complaint: You missed a HUGE opportunity on "Borderlands 3: Oops! All Memes Edition!" You should have made that game a preview, and had the release on April 20. That was a worse omission than some fart jokes. But otherwise thank you for another hilarious April Fools issue!

AJ "Ast3rikk" Brown
via email

We alerted the *Game Infarcer* staff of the missed opportunity, and they said that they didn't get why it was a joke even after we explained it in great detail. They then proceeded to spout off another dozen fart jokes that they wanted to include.

Tech Specs

The PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X have different specs, both having more of one thing and less of another. That's the same thing that happened with PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, and the games were basically the same on both systems. I'm guessing that will happen again with this generation. Any insight?

Phillip "The Dog" Rolland
Savage, MN

We won't know what developers are able to achieve on each system until we see it with our own eyes. The parity you saw this generation could also happen in the next, but certain aspects of the new hardware could potentially be used to make a difference in load times and visuals. Again, we don't want to speculate on what that will truly mean until we actually see a game. Here's hoping the hardware still hits this fall.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

Is Google Stadia dead?

No, Stadia isn't dead. Stadia's 2019 launch didn't make many waves, but Google continues to support the streaming tech and has first-party dev teams working on exclusive games. We shouldn't be surprised if we see what some of those studios are working on in 2020.

My friend keeps calling Xbox's next system Xbox Series One. Microsoft dropped the ball on the name, right?

It's certainly confusing, but over time, we bet we'll all have Xbox Series X down pat.

How long do you think League of Legends will be played?

This may sound silly, but it could be one of those "forever games" like chess or checkers. We don't see its popularity diminishing any time soon.

Best Comment:

"Does Game Informer sell toilet paper?"

Question Of The Month:

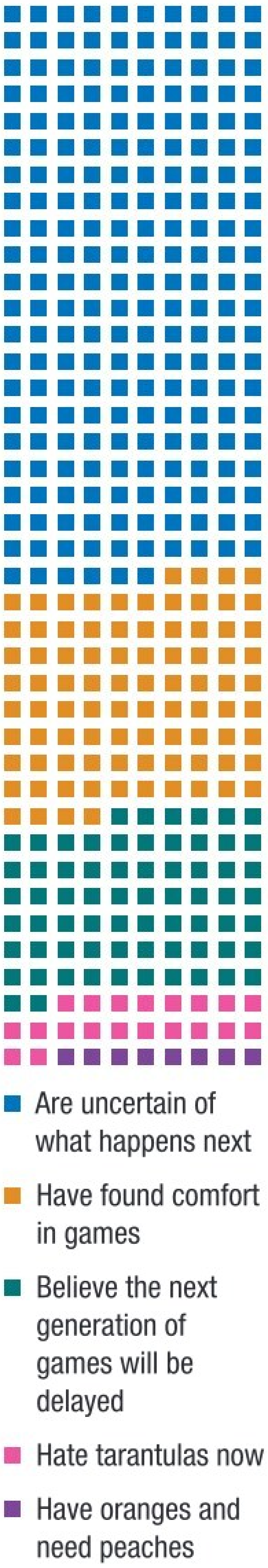
If you are quarantined, what games are helping you pass the time?

gi spy

(Left) Blizzard's Steven Khoo is keeping an eye on Overwatch and Overwatch 2 developments from his kitchen **(Right)** Bethesda's Nicholas Patterson protects the world's last bottle of Nuka Cola Quantum

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



Console Wars

People say don't pay attention to the console war, but I can't help it because my friends are constantly telling me PlayStation 5 is going to be better and I am an Xbox guy. From what I read, Xbox Series X is going to be way more powerful than PlayStation 5, so I just have to keep telling my friends that. Is there any other ammo you can give me to help my cause?

Aahan Anand
Carmel, IN

We should all be united in gaming. Play where you want to. As cross-play becomes a standard for multiplayer (and it will), it won't matter what hardware is used – you will be able to play most games with your friends. We have no doubt PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X are both going to be awesome.

The Worth Of Expansions

I don't think DLC or expansion packs should really make the Top 50, especially DLC. Technically speaking, neither are their own games. They're just add-ons for games that were released earlier on. It'd be like putting Fortnite on it every year cause of the new seasons treated as new games.

Sean Gelish
Tampa, FL

In our Top 50 Games of 2019 list one of the spaces was filled by Assassin's Creed Odyssey – The Fate of Atlantis, an expansion to the core game. Since it played like a complete game, we thought it deserved a spot. Decisions like this are not made lightly, and are debated heavily as we select just 50 games each year.

PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X, Or Switch?

Last month we asked our readers if they could only get one new system, what would it be. Here's what they had to say …

Man, what a hard question! I am a huge Sony and Nintendo fan, and to have one without the other makes me want to weep. I would have to go with Switch, even though the graphics and online are not the best. Nintendo just has such a powerful first-party lineup, and I love being able to play my Switch anywhere and then pop it in and play it on a big TV. Make no mistake though, I would have nightly mourning sessions over the loss of my beautiful PS5, then get back on Animal Crossing: New Horizons.

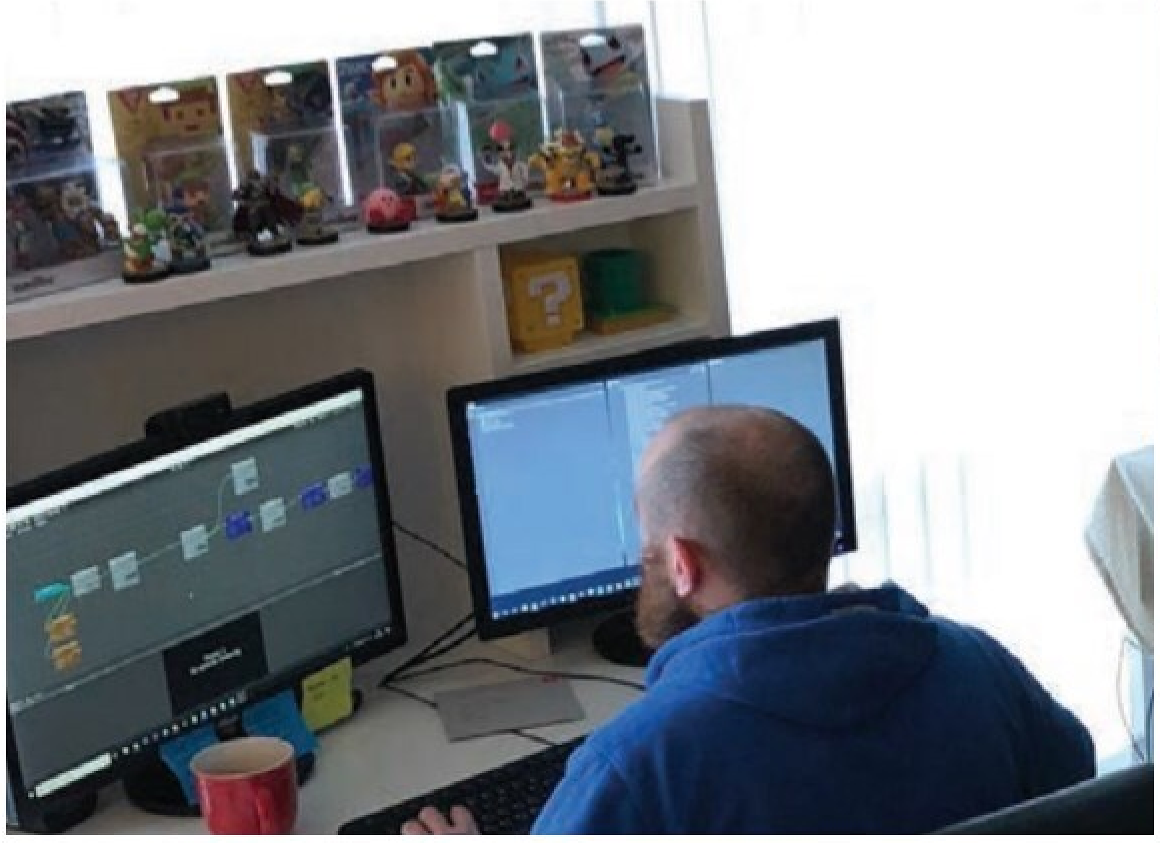
Jeremy Amacher
via email

I've always been a PlayStation person, but Animal Crossing: New Horizons has totally changed my perspective on games, and now I just want to go through Nintendo's catalogue of games. I think that's my future for the next few years. So, Switch.

Deborah Wingham
San Antonio, TX

I fear both Xbox Series X and PlayStation 5 are going to be super expensive, and I don't want to spend any money on anything other than food and house bills right now given the state of things. I'm just going to stay with PS4 and PC. Hope we still get new games on PS4 in 2020 and 2021.

Anonymous
via email



(Left) Odd Bug Studio continues work on Tails of Iron in a home turned into a development studio **(Right)** Ubisoft's Tim Cummins has all the help he needs in his home office

WINNER

1 Jacqueline Cabbage

This Cuphead diorama perfectly sums up the game and the era that inspired it

2 Meallanie Griffin

Ori is often adorable, but … she can also be terrifying with a weapon in hand

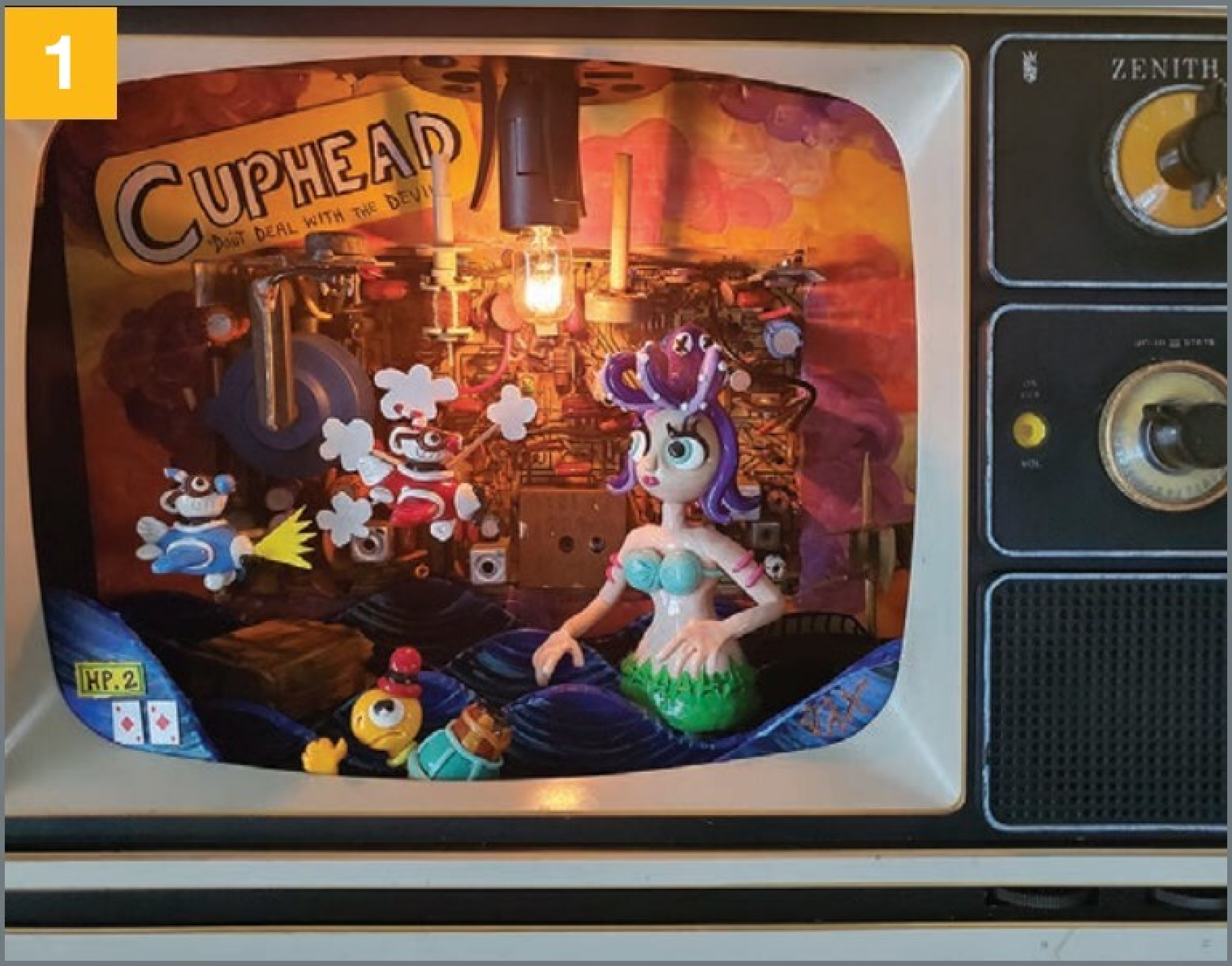
3 Cain Sparrow

People shouldn't underestimate D.Va's damage-dealing potential with her pistol

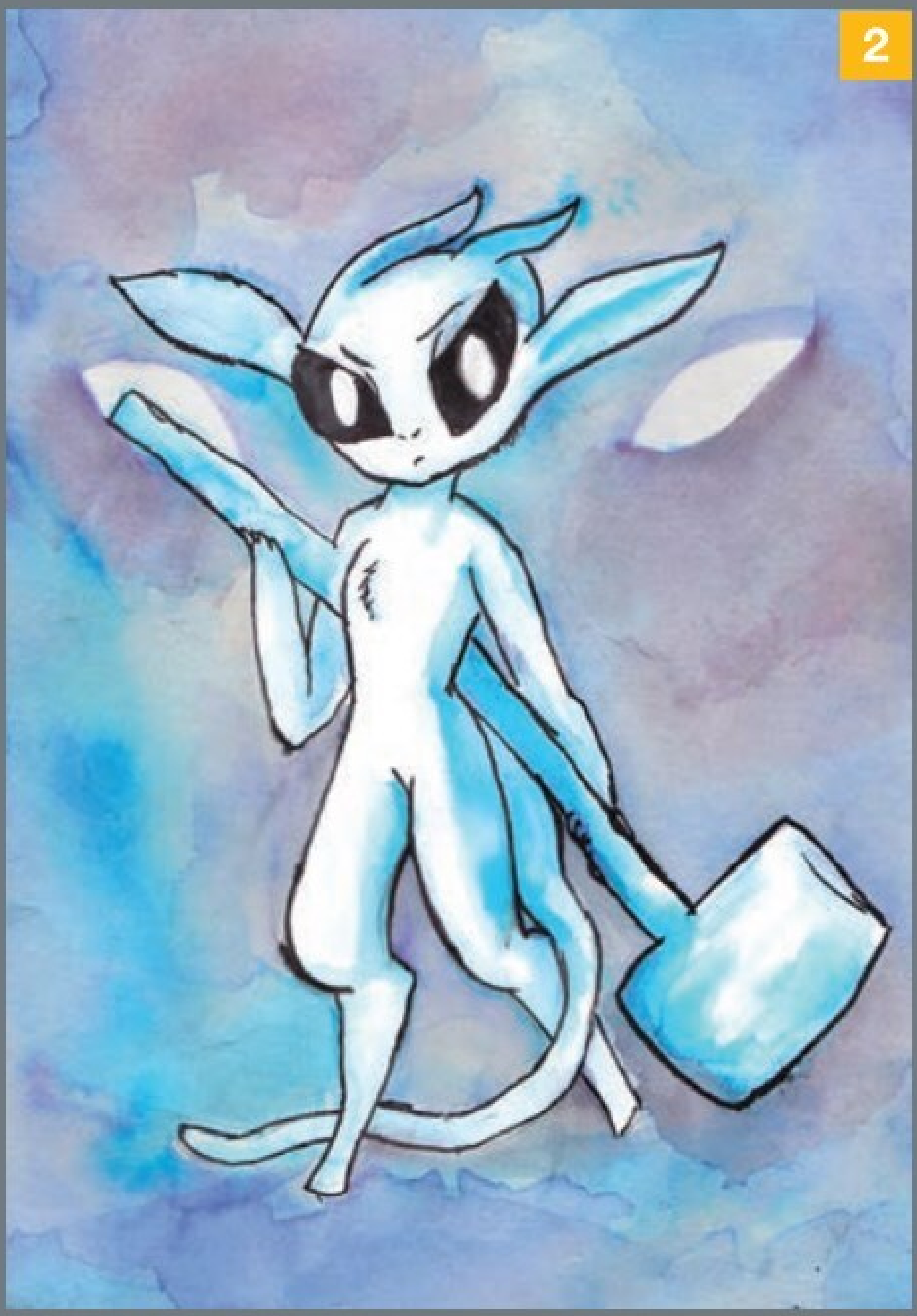
4 Benjamin Colobong

Great memories from the NES are everywhere in this creative wall art

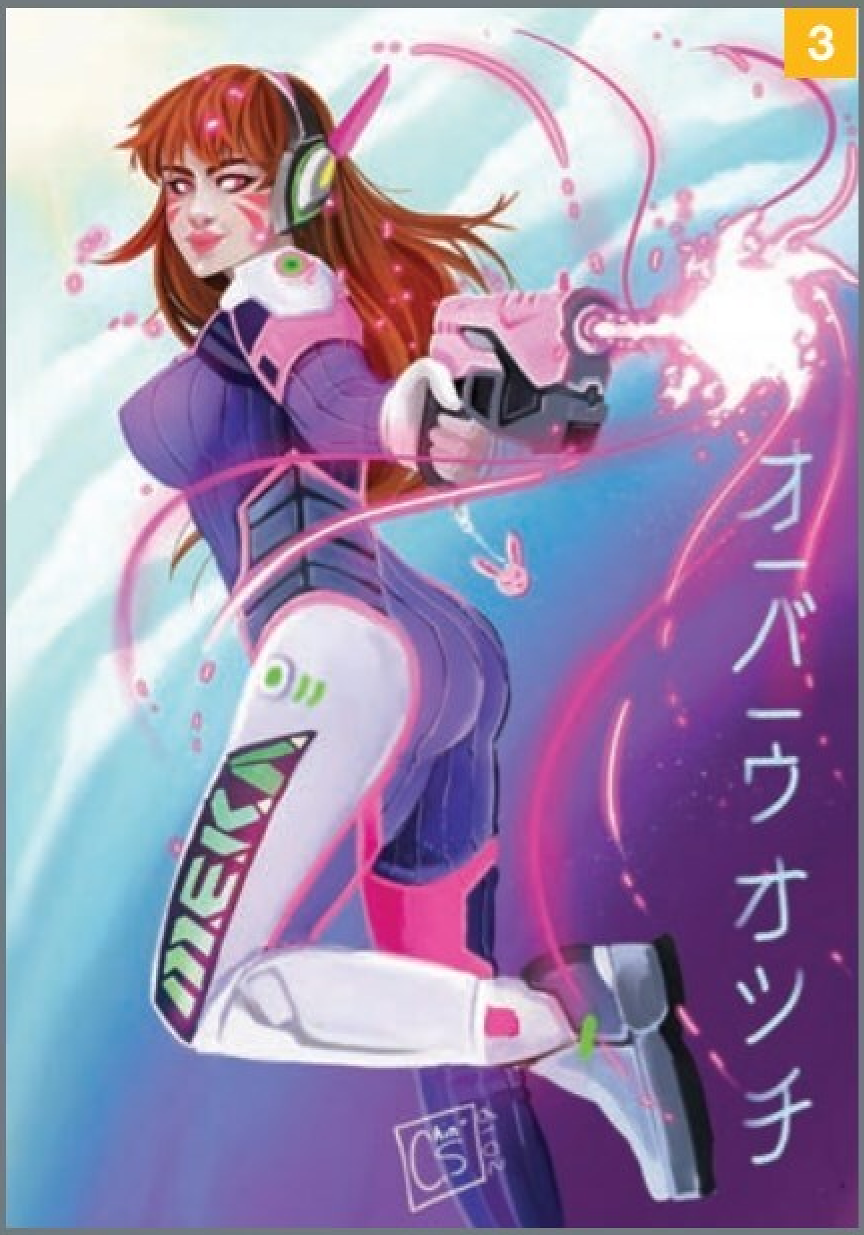
1


CUPHEAD
DON'T DEAL WITH THE DEVIL
HP.2
ZENITH

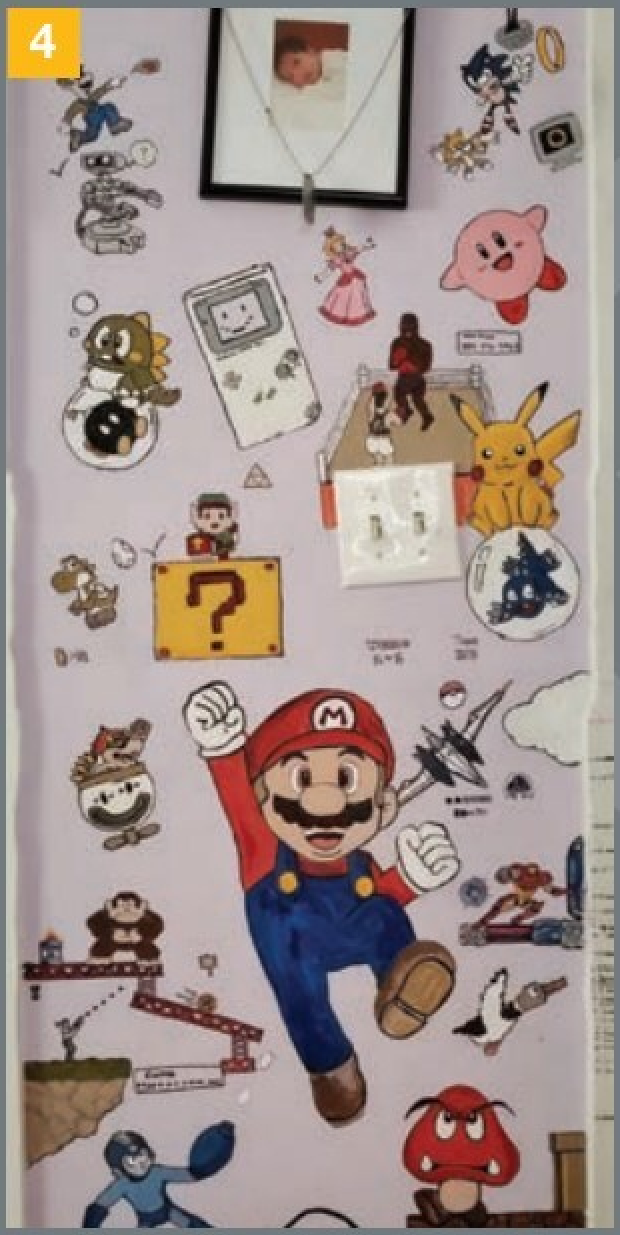
2



3



4



Submit your art for a chance to win a prize! Please include your name, email address, and return address.
Entries become the property of Game Informer and cannot be returned. Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media.
Send to: Game Informer Reader Art Contest, 724 First Street North, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401 | Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

(Left) Insomniac's James Stevenson says his home office isn't so bad
(Right) EA's Tracey Thompson isn't following social-distancing rules with her titan friend

COMPARING THE XBOX SERIES X & PLAYSTATION 5 SO FAR

Official specs and features give a glimpse of next-gen gaming

New details regarding the Xbox Series X and PlayStation 5 have shed more light on the consoles' approach to power, hard drives, and backwards compatibility. More than just bullet points, how developers respond to and utilize these features will impact the games created for them. Much still needs to be revealed about both systems to get a true picture of what's coming our way, but a portrait of what they are capable of is slowly coming together.

by Matthew Kato

THE NUMBERS GAME

Most of the hardware specs for both systems have been officially released, showing how powerful they are while highlighting different architectural approaches for developers as they create their experiences. One of the specs that catches people's eye is the difference in the speed and performance between the two systems' graphics processing units (GPUs). The Xbox Series X's GPU has 52 compute units (CUs) at a constant speed of 1.825GHz capable of 12 TFLOPs (a metric of graphical performance based on trillions of floating-point operations per second) as opposed to PlayStation 5's 36 CUs at up to 2.23GHz for 10.3 TFLOPs.

Judging solely by the numbers, the Xbox Series X is more powerful than the PS5, but differences in the systems' designs could enable varied approaches to development. The PlayStation 5's GPU runs at a variable frequency that can reach 2.23GHz, but it might not always sit at this higher frequency. PS5 system architect Mark Cerny told deep-diving tech website *Digital Foundry*, however, that he anticipates it to run at or near that speed most of the time.

Microsoft, meanwhile, says it has optimized the Series X for a constant GPU speed of 1.825GHz. Xbox technical fellow and system architect Andrew Goossen also talked to *Digital Foundry* and explained that the approach was to set a high 12 TFLOPs target (double that of the Xbox One X) as an average bar even for the worst-case scenarios instead of a maximum achievable by some.

PlayStation 5's Cerny, in a presentation originally intended for the canceled Game Developers Conference, defended the configuration of the PS5. In particular, he said that the TFLOP metric isn't thoroughly indicative of the GPU's performance, that a high GPU frequency alone provides benefits not represented in a TFLOP number. Similarly, he pointed out how the 36

Xbox Series X

CUs on the PS5 GPU can work more efficiently when working in parallel than if there were simply more of them.

Sony appears to favor speed over top-end power, and it may depend on each developer to answer the question as to which approach is better or easier for them. First-party studios are usually able to optimize their games for more discernible results due to their close relationships with the console manufacturers; it's often easier and more cost-effective for third parties to create their titles based on a common denomination of specs across multiple systems.

The PS5's CPU speed is also variable, capable of going up to 3.5GHz, and it can transfer some of its unused power over to the GPU. This is slower than the Xbox Series X's constant 3.8GHz. This figure for the Series X's CPU applies to when the system's hyper-threading for increased performance is disabled, dipping to 3.6GHz when enabled. Xbox Series X system architect Andrew Goossen told *Digital Foundry* that he expects most Series X game developers to initially disable hyper-threading until they can effectively utilize it. When they do, Goossen says it could mean 30 percent more performance.

A look at the numbers for the two systems reveals other differences for developers to consider. The PlayStation 5 has a smaller internal solid-state drive (SSD) of 825GB compared to the Xbox Series X's 1TB (more on the effect of solid-state drives on games later). However, the PS5's SSD read bandwidth ranges from 5.5GB/s for uncompressed data to up to 9GB/s for compressed data. This is double the Series X's uncompressed/compressed range of 2.4GB/s to 4.8GB/s.

So far, the reactions of developers and analysts to the systems confirm the Xbox Series X's power advantage while still painting the PS5 as plenty capable.

USHERING IN NEXT-GEN GAMING

Putting substance to the numbers, Microsoft has already shown some of its system's visual capabilities, particularly the use of ray tracing – a rendering technique for producing realistic light and shadows. Technical demos of existing titles Minecraft and Gears 5 revealed some of the possibilities, showing how light diffuses in an area, reflects off of objects, casts shadows, and creates transparency. The Gears 5 demo not only demonstrated the increased particle count and resolution of the upcoming console (including specs beyond the PC ultra spec setting), but how it can smooth the transition between cutscenes and gameplay as both can run at 60 frames per second in 4K together.

Xbox Series X And PlayStation 5 Specs

CPU

XSX: Custom AMD Zen 2 8x cores/16 threads @ 3.8GHz (3.6GHz w/ hyper-threading)
PS5: Custom AMD Zen 2 8x cores/16 threads w/ variable frequency up to 3.5GHz

GPU

XSX: Custom AMD RDNA 2 52 CUs @ 1.825GHz (12 TFLOPs)
PS5: Custom AMD RDNA 2 36 CUs w/ variable frequency up to 2.23GHz (up to 10.3 TFLOPs)

Memory (+bandwidth)

XSX: 16GB GDDR6 (10GB optimal memory @ 560GB/s, 6GB standard memory @ 336GB/s)
PS5: 16GB GDDR6 (448GB/s)

Internal Storage

XSX: 1TB SSD
PS5: 825GB SSD

I/O Throughput

XSX: 2.4GB/s (raw), 4.8GB/s (compressed)
PS5: 5.5GB/s (raw), 8-9GB/s (compressed)

Expandable Storage

XSX: 1TB SSD (external), USB
PS5: SSD size TBA (internal), USB

Optical Drive

XSX: 4K UHD Blu-ray drive
PS5: 4K UHD Blu-ray drive

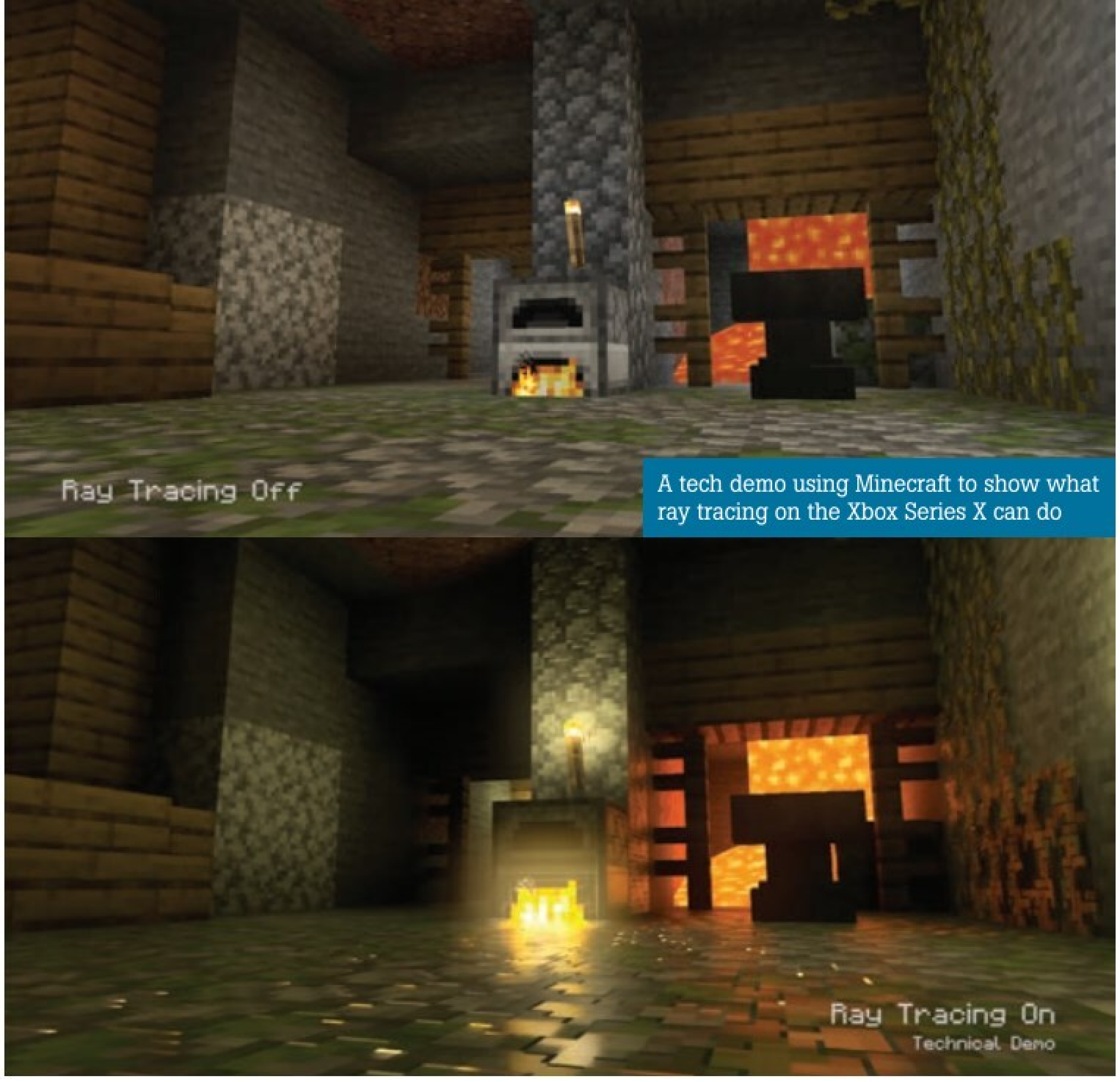
Video Output

XSX: HDMI 2.1 (variable refresh rate), supports 4K/120hz TVs, 8K TVs
PS5: HDMI 2.1 (variable refresh rate), supports 4K/120hz TVs, 8K TVs

At the time of this writing, Sony has not done a similar public demonstration of the PlayStation 5, which also uses ray tracing, but system architect Mark Cerny outlined some of the console's capabilities. Apart from running through the numbers, Cerny pointed out that the system's configuration of constantly supplying power while varying the frequencies of the CPU and GPU makes the PS5 quieter than the PS4, and its noise won't vary from game to game. Noise was a big issue for some PS4 titles, particularly demanding ones like Rockstar's Red Dead Redemption 2, so cutting down on this problem is a positive development for many gamers.

Cerny also explained Sony's approach to audio with the PlayStation 5, and the desire to create virtual surround sound by synthesizing and presenting hundreds of in-game sound sources. An example of this could be to fool players' ears into hearing sounds from multiple directions – including from behind – even if they're only using headphones or a stereo TV setup. Cerny says configuring the PS5's audio engine to exactly accommodate myriad consumer setups is a multi-year process, but headphone implementation is largely complete.

Both consoles make use of an internal SSD, which makes load times better because of their ability to access more data at much faster speeds than a normal hard disc drive (HDD). Beyond that, both Cerny and Goossen discussed how their upcoming systems will change how developers construct environments in titles due to the SSD. They will no longer have to use design tricks, such as elevator rides or long staircases, to mask mid-level loads. *Digital Foundry* also posits in general that a solid state hard drive optimizes the size of game installs, so hopefully developers take advantage of this for smaller game installs.



A tech demo using Minecraft to show what ray tracing on the Xbox Series X can do

Cerny even speculated that PS5 developers might have to slow down fast-travel warps in games because they can be near-instantaneous, and actual player movement could be faster due to the system no longer being constrained by how quickly it loads in assets.

The Xbox Series X's SSD enables Microsoft's Quick Resume feature, which can suspend your progress and let you jump back to where you left off in a title even if you turn off the system or run an update. *Digital Foundry* says the Series X can do this with at least three Series X games, and it took the system approximately 6.5 seconds to hop among Xbox One X titles. We expect the PS5 to offer a similar feature due to its SSD and the fact that the feature already exists for the PS4, but Sony has yet to confirm this at the time of this writing.

Internal solid-state drives benefit both systems, but Microsoft and Sony have differing approaches to extra space via an additional hard drive. Both accommodate external USB drives and a proprietary extra SSD. The Xbox Series X's extended SSD storage (1TB) is external, but the PS5's additional SSD connects via an internal bay. We don't know how much these extra SSDs will cost in either company's case, but Sony has admitted its extra SSD doesn't actually exist yet. Cerny says that the company doesn't know which third-party SSDs will meet specs yet, and that likely won't happen until after the PS5 launches.

OLD GAMES ON NEW SYSTEMS

Microsoft has signaled its commitment to backwards compatibility of older games with the Series X since before the console was even officially announced. You'll be able to play any title that now runs on the Xbox One on the upcoming console with the added benefits of improved framerates, resolutions, and graphical fidelity. The company is also continuing its Game Pass subscription service, further expanding what you can play on the Series X.

While Microsoft has clearly pointed out that its system's backwards compatibility includes playing titles from the Xbox 360 and original Xbox, so far Sony has only committed to backwards compatibility for PlayStation 4 titles on the PlayStation 5 (which will also be improved). Furthermore, Sony has been vague about how many PS4 titles will be available through backwards compatibility both at launch and in the future, though Cerny says "almost all" of the top 100 PS4 games (based on play time) were playable when tested on PS5 hardware.

Right now, we know more about the Xbox Series X, but the two console manufacturers are emphasizing different aspects of their systems, giving game developers tools to create new worlds that make the most of the platforms. Historically, the system with the most power hasn't always become the most popular, but even that is only one facet of a system in an age when platforms are attractive for many reasons beyond simply tech numbers. The consoles' specs and new features provide recognizable elements to latch onto for the time being, but they won't become reality until we get our hands on their games. ◆

The PlayStation 5 DualSense Controller

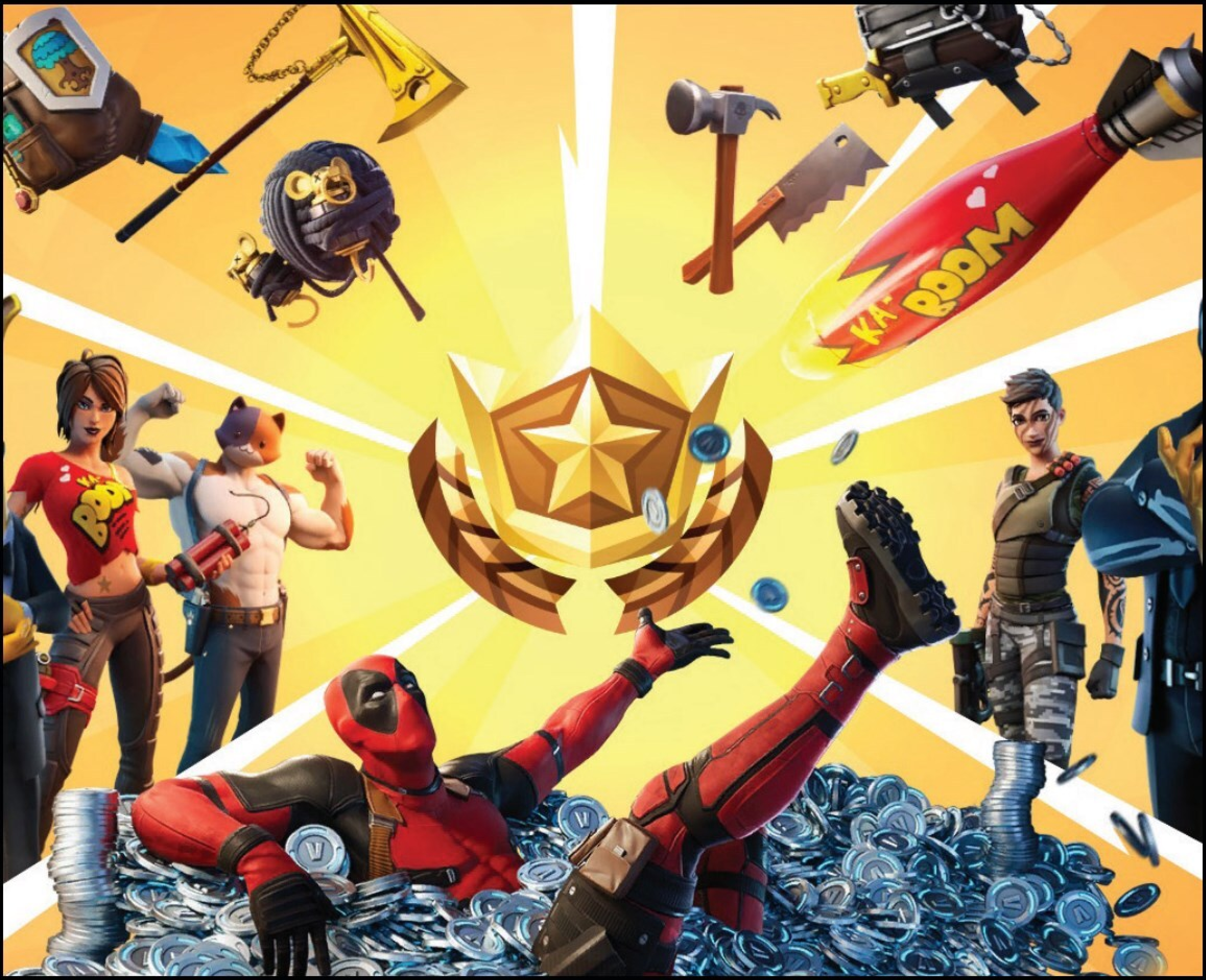
Sony is evolving its classic controller form for the PS5, adding haptic feedback, trigger tension, and replacing the Share button with the Create button. The Create button has the same functionality as well as new, as-yet-unannounced capabilities.

Overall Sony wants to make the controller lighter and improve battery life, as well as tweak its general form. The trigger angles are different than the PS4, as is the grip.

Finally, the DualSense features a built-in mic for chat, although players can still plug a headset into a controller if they prefer.

FLIP THE RAINBOW
Skittles
TASTE THE RAINBOW®

©2017 Wm. Wrigley Jr. Company. SKITTLES and all affiliated designs are trademarks of Wm. Wrigley Jr. Company or its affiliates.



The Battle Pass Is The New Lootbox

by Daniel Tack

The world of video game monetization is constantly expanding, offering players new cosmetics, conveniences, and functionality. It's either a part of a free-to-play model or, increasingly more common today, additional costs on top of a traditional price. The tale of the last half-decade has been the ubiquitous lootbox – a gambler's delight that could contain highly prized items, skins, or even power boosts. The lootbox may have originated in Eastern MMORPGs and mobile games, but it expanded easily to the entire industry. If you've played games in the last decade, chances are you've been tempted to take the plunge into forms of monetization like lootboxes and battle passes.

I'll get right to the point: Lootboxes are terrible, and while battle passes are an improvement, they're still not gamer-friendly. It's not difficult to see how lootboxes are often perceived as a predatory monetization tool; they're accompanied by all the fanfare of a slot machine, tapping into our innate desire as we search for a big win. Some games even announce a big lootbox win to the entire channel or server to draw attention to what's available in those gaudy presents. While I have never felt terribly burned by lootboxes on a personal level, there are numerous horror stories out there, especially in the mobile space, of those who have spent hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of dollars chasing rare characters and cosmetics.

Today, the battle pass is rapidly overtaking the lootbox. Concerns over legislation that would threaten the lootbox may have spurred this shift, but the model really got going thanks to Dota 2's annual esports tournament, The International. Battle passes came packaged with a compendium, giving players access to a wealth of cosmetics, voting tools, fantasy esports, and even special game modes. Ironically, many of the rewards in this early form of battle pass were various kinds of lootboxes.

The current state of battle passes gained traction thanks to Fortnite, and this revenue generation system is now a commonplace sight in full-price fare like Call of Duty and Destiny. In some ways, battle passes merely continue a disturbing trend of offering more paid content in a game you've already purchased, and that's a trend that I could do without.

With a battle pass, there are typically two tracks – one paid, one unpaid – allowing everyone to get certain rewards as they play the game. Paying players get better, more frequent rewards. These passes typically run for a "season" of content, which can be range from weeks to months, and usually tie the most epic rewards to the highest battle-pass ranks. Ranking up the battle pass differs from game to game, but in general, you're incentivized via daily tasks and playing … a lot. A whole lot, if you ever plan to finish off a battle pass before the season ends.

For some, these passes may seem like

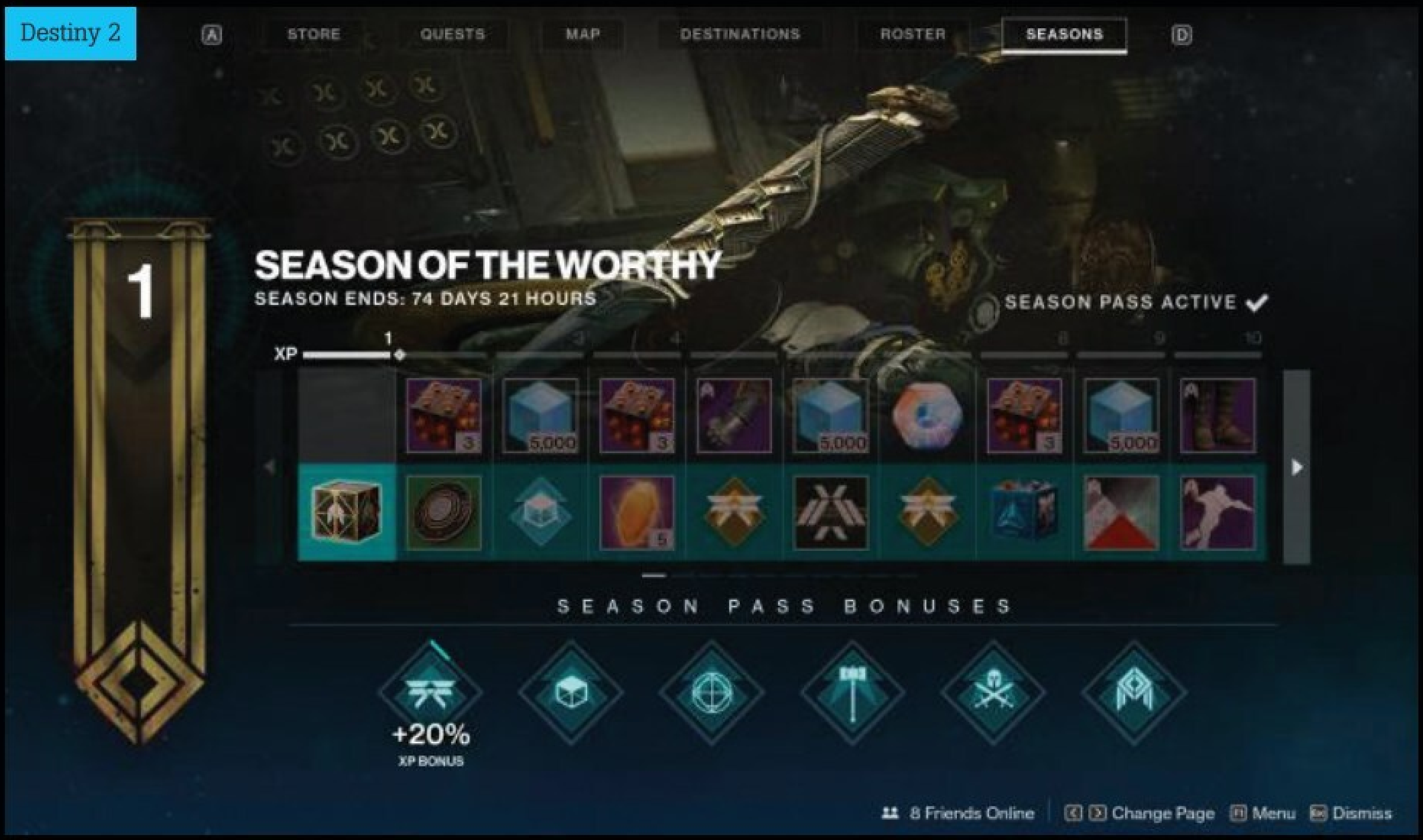
an innocuous cosmetic cache, an optional bonus for a game you're already enjoying. However, these passes prey on habit-forming behaviors. Many battle passes will even prompt for more transactions after the initial purchase. Afraid you won't hit tier 100 for that limited-edition skin unlock, but you gotta have it? You're presented with a convenient answer to the problem – forking over currency directly for battle-pass levels, which can add up quickly. Despite your ostensible love of the game you're playing every day, this can feel like you're being held hostage or completing rote chores, and detract from the fun you're supposed to be having. But hey, at least you are guaranteed the awesome reward, unlike a lootbox where you could spin for hours and spend many hundreds of dollars trying to get something with a .2 percent drop rate.

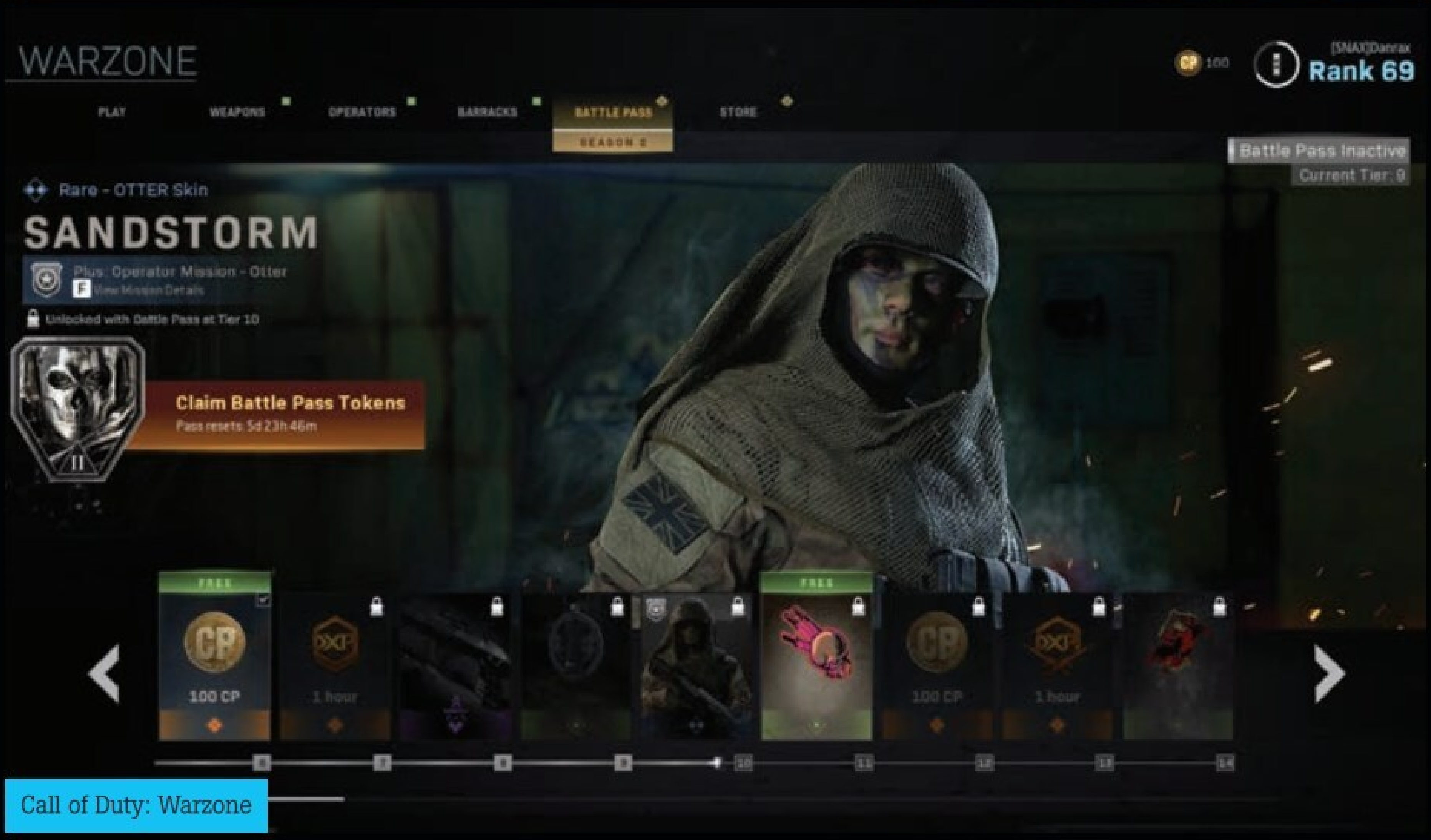
Battle passes are heaps better than the Pavlovian instant gratification that lootboxes tap into, but they come with their own subtle hurdles for players to consciously navigate. Most rewards remove the element of randomization, so you at least have a good idea about what you can potentially earn, but you're on the clock to complete the pass from the moment you buy it. The battle pass toys with the concept of limited-time exclusivity, the old-school "get it now before it's gone" marketing hook that's been used ad infinitum. If you are a few days of resources short when the season ends, you and I both know you're going to splash a few chips in the pot to come away with the prize. My mind reels just thinking about the possibilities here, like creating passes that are intentionally designed to just barely miss standard completion.

While many games keep it "cosmetic and clean" on the battle pass, not all games do, and those that offer actual power boosts via paid passes are more questionable. Many times these potential power boosts are obfuscated by chance, such as a recent Destiny 2 battle pass where you "may" get something useful or powerful via pass unlocks. However, make no mistake – whether you're attaching functionality to the pass or not, there are no innocents in the battle-pass game.

We're entering another generation of monetization, one primed to capitalize on the concept of seasonal content and living game models. Battle passes come with their own suite of curiosities and issues, and I greet them with an uneasy smile as I give a not-so-heartfelt goodbye to the lootbox. ◆

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer


Destiny 2
STORE
QUESTS
MAP
DESTINATIONS
ROSTER
SEASONS
1
SEASON OF THE WORTHY
SEASON ENDS: 74 DAYS 21 HOURS
SEASON PASS ACTIVE ✓
XP
SEASON PASS BONUSES
+20%
XP BONUS
8 Friends Online
Change Page
Menu
Dismiss


Call of Duty: Warzone
WARZONE
PLAY
WEAPONS
OPERATORS
BARRACKS
BATTLE PASS
SEASON 2
STORE
Rank 69
Battle Pass Inactive
Current Tier: 9
Rare - OTTER Skin
SANDSTORM
Plus: Operator Mission - Otter
Unlocked with Battle Pass at Tier 10
Claim Battle Pass Tokens
Pass resets 5d 23h 46m
FREE
100 CP
1 hour

AVAILABLE IN MAY

Saints Row: The Third - Remastered

Dungeon of the Endless

Arcade Spirits

Pre-Order Today at
GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS®

TEEN to MATURE 17+
T-M
ESRB esrb.org

Navigating Anxiety In Quarantine With Simulation Games

by Kimberley Wallace

These are not normal times; these are anxious times. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 40 million adults in the United States suffer from an anxiety disorder, making them the most common form of mental illness in our country. Even if you've never battled a disorder, you've most likely felt anxiety at some point in your life, and with the current state of things with COVID-19, our economy, and the political climate, it's perfectly understandable to feel more anxious right now. Collectively, we must find ways to cope with all these changes, which is easier said than done.

Anxiety and I are the bitterest of enemies – it's a constant in my life that I can't ignore. When things were escalating with the coronavirus, I didn't panic, but I became inundated with worry. I hated having any free time to think about it more than I had to, and quickly took to playing a slew of simulation games. I didn't even realize I was doing it at first, but it makes sense: Simulation games allow us to take on a different role and (hopefully) build toward something better. Whether you're running a farm or managing a theme park, they give you a great level of agency to impact the world. In an uncertain time where I felt like I couldn't change the things happening around, they gave me the control I so desperately craved.

Ironically enough, the game that I sunk countless hours into felt like one that I should want no part of given the certain circumstances: Two Point Hospital, a spiritual successor to Theme Hospital. Yes, you run a hospital – the last place anyone wants to be right now – managing every aspect from staff hiring to who to move up on the waitlist. The game even addresses epidemics! To be fair, it does so in a comical way by giving people ridiculous illnesses like involuntarily exercising, but it also showcases how fast things can spread if you don't treat people in a timely manner. And yet, something about being able to micromanage everything brought not only a good distraction, but also a sense of control that I lacked in the real world.

I also returned to The Sims around this same time, and found it comforting for its sense of normalcy. Your sims are essentially living the day-to-day lives that we've had to put on hold. They're leaving their homes to go to work; they don't have to practice social distancing, allowing them to freely occupy places like

Two Point Hospital

bars, restaurants, and parks. In this world, the coronavirus doesn't exist. I've felt like my life has stalled since the imposed quarantine, but in The Sims, the sky's the limit: that promotion is in reach and buying a luxury item doesn't feel like such a risk – nor does having a child.

I don't think turning to these types of experiences right now is all that surprising. We've all seen how Animal Crossing: New Horizons has taken over. While the series has always been popular, it feels like it's struck a chord with more people than ever before, and it makes sense. In the game, you're essentially creating a safe space and taking care of yourself. Maintaining your island and watching it grow is a peaceful experience. There are no stakes – nothing to lose and everything to gain. Visiting friends' islands is a way to socialize and get an intimate look at how they've created their own safe haven. It is a calming presence in my day.

Technology has also allowed me to recover things that felt completely lost. I'm a huge sports fan, and watching games is often how I de-stress; seeing only reruns for my favorites like hockey and basketball has been difficult – especially since the playoffs were supposed to be happening right now. So many sports video games allow you to step into the role of general manager and pull the strings to create a championship-caliber team. This has always been one of my favorite modes, but I've especially enjoyed playing lately because it puts me in control and lets me see the season to the end, and then build toward the next victory.

I'm not saying we detach from real life, of course, but I think simulation games offer an interesting opportunity to cope with what's going on around us. There's an emotional strain and toll that comes with quarantine and isolation, but playing games can allow some relief. Psychological research and teachings support this. For example, a study in the *Journal of Cybertherapy and Rehabilitation* conducted by Carmen Russoniello, Kevin O'Brien, and Jennifer M. Parks found playing a casual video game can reduce stress, improve mood, and even lower heart rates.

I reached out to Dr. Rachel Kowert, who is the research director of Take This, a non-profit organization that provides mental health information and resources to the gaming community and industry. Kowert confirmed that video games are effective at relieving stress, especially with anxiety that surfaces due to current environmental circumstances. "The sense of independence, achievement, and connectedness from video games fulfills basic psychological needs," Kowert says. "If you are looking to relax, games that are peaceful and somewhat repetitive are going to be more effective at relaxation than games with complicated controls, lore, and reward systems," says Kowert, pointing to Stardew Valley's calm gameplay, low pressure, and open-ended nature as a good example. "It is important to point out that escapism, whether it be into a movie, a book, or video games, can be a constructive coping mechanism from the day-to-day."

Right now, we're all just trying to navigate this different lifestyle, and it looks like we're in it for the long haul. We all can use different ways to get by, and simulations have been a powerful tool for me in these difficult times. ◆

Anxiety Resources

If you are having trouble managing your anxiety, it is important to seek help. The Centers for Disease Control And Prevention (CDC) recommends taking care of your body via a balanced diet and exercise, connecting with others, and staying informed but avoiding too much exposure to news. Here are some additional resources to help others.

Online Support Groups

- **7 Cups** (www.7cups.com)**:** Offers free online text chat with a trained listener for emotional support alongside fee-for-service online therapy with a licensed mental health professional.
- **The Tribe Wellness Community** (support.therapytribe.com)**:** Provides free, online peer support groups for those facing mental health challenges.
- **Support Group Central** (www.supportgroupscentral.com)**:** Connects you to 200+ support groups on numerous mental health conditions for free or low cost.

Helplines

- **National Alliance On Mental Health:** 1-800-950-6264
- **Substance Abuse And Mental Health Services Administration:** 1-800-985-5990
- **Crisis Text Line:** text a counselor at 741741
- **Helpline Center:** 1-800-273-8255

Websites

- **Anxiety And Depression Association of America:** https://adaa.org/
- **Centers For Disease Control And Prevention:** https://www.cdc.gov/
- **Substance Abuse And Mental Health Services Administration:** https://www.samhsa.gov/
- **National Alliance On Mental Illness:** https://www.nami.org/

Stardew Valley

The Sims 4

The Good

CONTROL developer Remedy Entertainment has signed a deal with Epic Games, who will publish two titles from the Finnish studio. The first game is a triple-A multi-platform title that's already in production, and the second is a smaller project set in the universe of the first title. Both will come out on next-gen platforms and PC in the next few years.

The Bad

THE LAST OF US PART II has been delayed again; this time due to logistical issues caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Developer Naughty Dog says the game is finished, but as of the time of this writing, it is holding back the game's release to "make sure everyone gets to play [the game] around the same time."

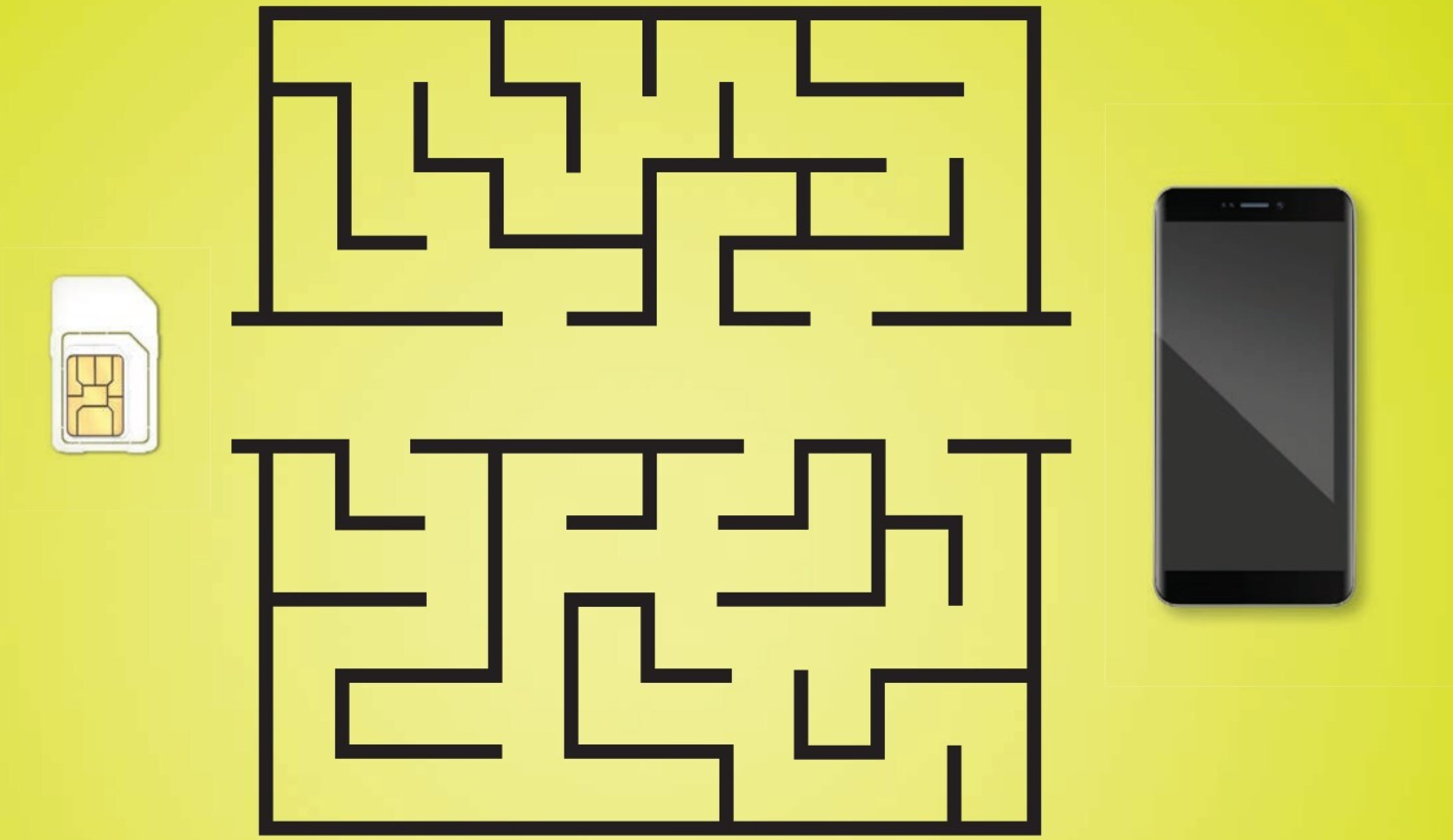
The Ugly

This year's **QUAKECON** has been canceled, also due to COVID-19. It was to be the convention's 25-year anniversary showcasing id Software and Bethesda's games, but the virus has created such uncertainty that even a postponement wasn't deemed possible.

Quotable

"Everyone said Tyreek Hill was going to win. I was in an [Xbox Live] party with a little kid on accident and I told him I'd get 50 for him. I'm pretty sure he's happy right now."

Derwin James Jr., Los Angeles Chargers safety, who destroyed Chiefs' receiver Tyreek Hill 52-3 in a Madden 20 tournament for COVID-19 charity relief.



There's a shortcut to saving on your wireless bill.

4G LTE
Straight Talk wireless
KEEP YOUR OWN PHONE
SIM Kit

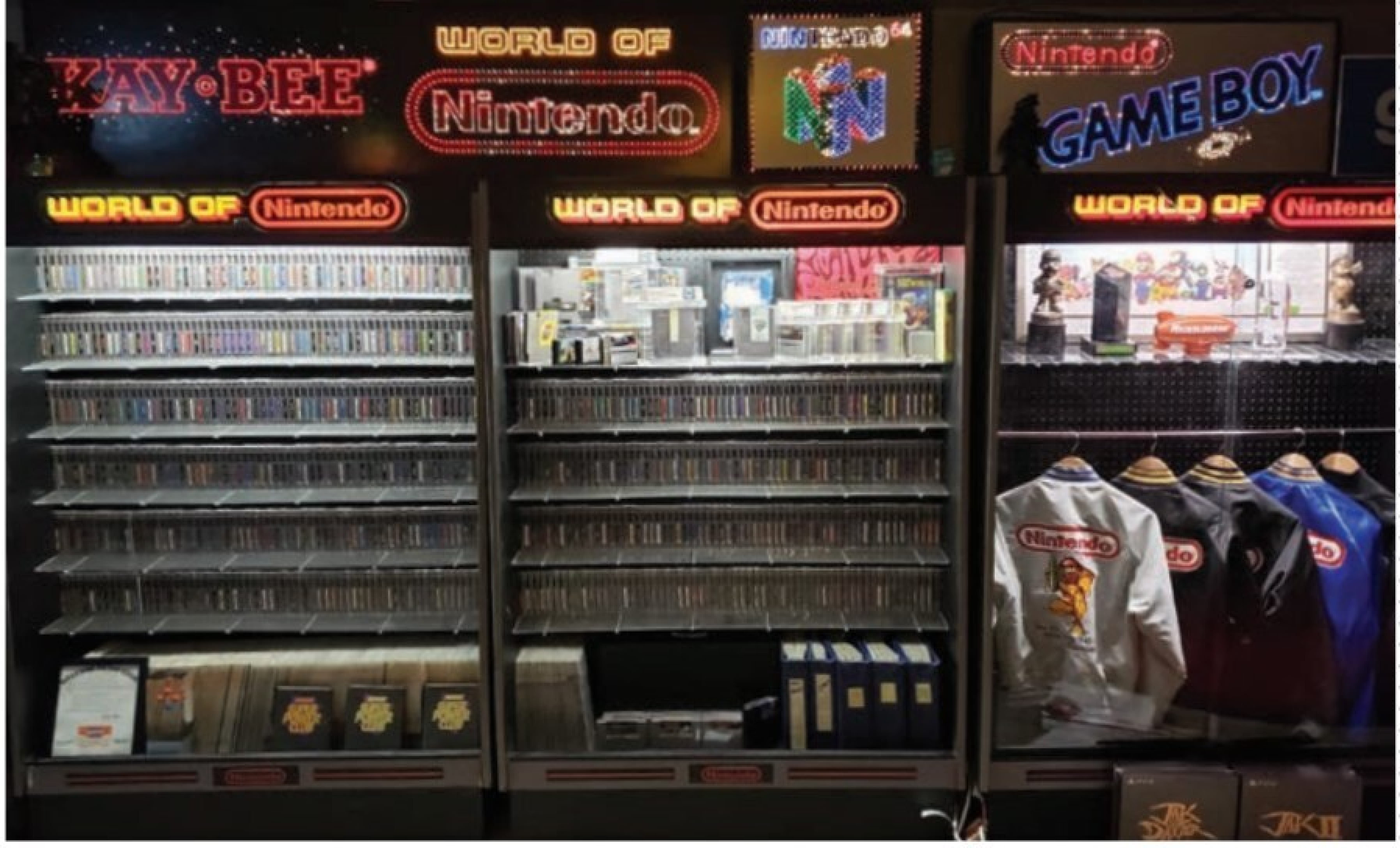
Tired of navigating the labyrinth of wireless offers to lower your monthly bill? There's an easier way! Just grab a Straight Talk Wireless Keep Your Own Phone SIM Kit and pop in the SIM card. With our Unlimited plan, you get unlimited data, talk and text, with 25GB of high-speed data for just $45/month. Winning has never felt so easy. Find out more at StraightTalk.com

Straight Talk® wireless

First 25GB at high speeds, then 2G.*

Keep Your Own Phone SIM Kit requires a compatible, unlocked phone. May need to change the phone's Access Point Name settings. *Please refer to Terms and Conditions at StraightTalk.com.

Only at Walmart



Collecting With Power

How the thrill of the hunt led one man to acquire some of the rarest artifacts from gaming's past

Name:
Stephan Reese

Occupation:
Senior producer at a mobile game studio

Location:
Simi Valley, CA

Twitter:
@ArtOfNP

YouTube:
Archon1981

Instagram:
@Archon1981

As dedicated a collector as you will find, Stephan Reese has recently garnered attention on social media thanks to his ever-growing collection of props and other items once featured in *Nintendo Power* magazine. However, his hobby is far from new, as the exhilaration from tracking down items has driven him to gather merchandise, sets, rarities, and things he didn't even know existed for decades. We caught up with him to learn the motivation behind dedicating his life to collectible games and other memorabilia.

interview by Brian Shea

What drove you to start this amazing video game collection?
The collection didn't start here. I think it's more than being interested in collecting games; I am more passionate about the hunt, and games just facilitate that. Originally, for like 30 years, I collected Ninja Turtles. That was my thing. I collected toys and comics and original art, but it got to a point where it's like, "Okay, I have literally found and purchased every single toy, and every single variant of every single comic book," and so I thought, "Alright, I'm done." I think any collection, when you have this switch in your head when it clicks over to "done," it stops being this living, breathing creature that you're feeding, and it starts being this weight around your neck. So, I was standing in the middle of this ridiculous toy and comic collection going, "Does this define me as a person? What would I be like without this?"

I've been in the games industry for about 20 years, and so I always had my little shoebox collection of video games and always had that childhood wish fulfillment of, "What would it be like to have every game ever?" There was just this conjunction of my life where I had this giant piggy bank of a collection that already existed that I didn't want anymore and then had this other interest that I was interested in jumping in. And then this third thing … my wife died in October of stage IV breast cancer, and she had gotten diagnosed right then, too. It was this third vector into game collecting of, "I need something to distract me."

Those three things – having a ton of money, a collection I hated, and my wife being diagnosed with cancer – made these perfect vertices of starting my game collection, and that's when I started collecting sets. Super Nintendo came first, and I did that in two-and-a-half months, so you can see that when I talk about being distracted, I was very, very distracted.

When did you pivot to *Nintendo Power* memorabilia?
So that went along, then I found a harder set, and then a harder set. I did Super Nintendo, then NES, then TurboGrafx, and then 3DO complete-in-box, and it got to a point where game collecting got easy, and I was like, "Oh no, here it comes again!" [laughs] And so I was thought, "I need to go deeper! That's got to be the solution. What's deeper?" I'd gotten really interested in Nintendo Gameplay Counselors, and how that happened was if you open up the first issue of *Nintendo Power*, the first thing you see is an ad for the Power Line. It's these three people wearing these gray jackets, and I go, "I wonder if those

PlayStation
Nintendo
Killer Instinct
PlayChoice-10

jackets exist." That was my first segue into, "I don't collect games anymore, I'm collecting weird s---." And so, I started hunting those jackets, and I started discovering these Nintendo employee items and trophies and equipment … I have televisions and phones from the call center. And it just got deeper, deeper, deeper.

Then I found one guy that had been a Gameplay Counselor and then transitioned to doing art for *Nintendo Power* magazine. As much as I love *Nintendo Power* – by then I had collected a full set – it never even occurred to me that the art would still be there. A lot of those artists will attest to Nintendo Japan kind of being a black hole for art; they would photocopy their work before they sent it out because they knew they'd never see it again. All of a sudden, I was like, "Oh my god, there's this new thing I can collect, and it's ridiculous!"

That's sort of the progression of how I got to art collecting from game collecting after I got progressively bored. [laughs] It's just like, even the rarest game is more common than any one of my art pieces because there's only one! It was just this need for the challenge more than anything that brought me to the art specifically, because that's what I get out of collecting more than anything.

That's quite the ocean you dove into there!

Yeah, it's funny, because people ask, "Well, what's out there that's missing that you really want?" and I'm like, "I don't know!" Like, you don't understand these things that I'm finding, I do not know they exist and then they're in my hands. I tell people I collect garbage, and it's true! Anything they kept at their desk – business cards, half-off coupons to local restaurants, stuff like that. I like doing that stuff especially because if I'm doing a display, then it helps it feel more lived in. Some of the employees when they're handing me things, they're like, "I'll take your money, but I have no idea why you want this!"

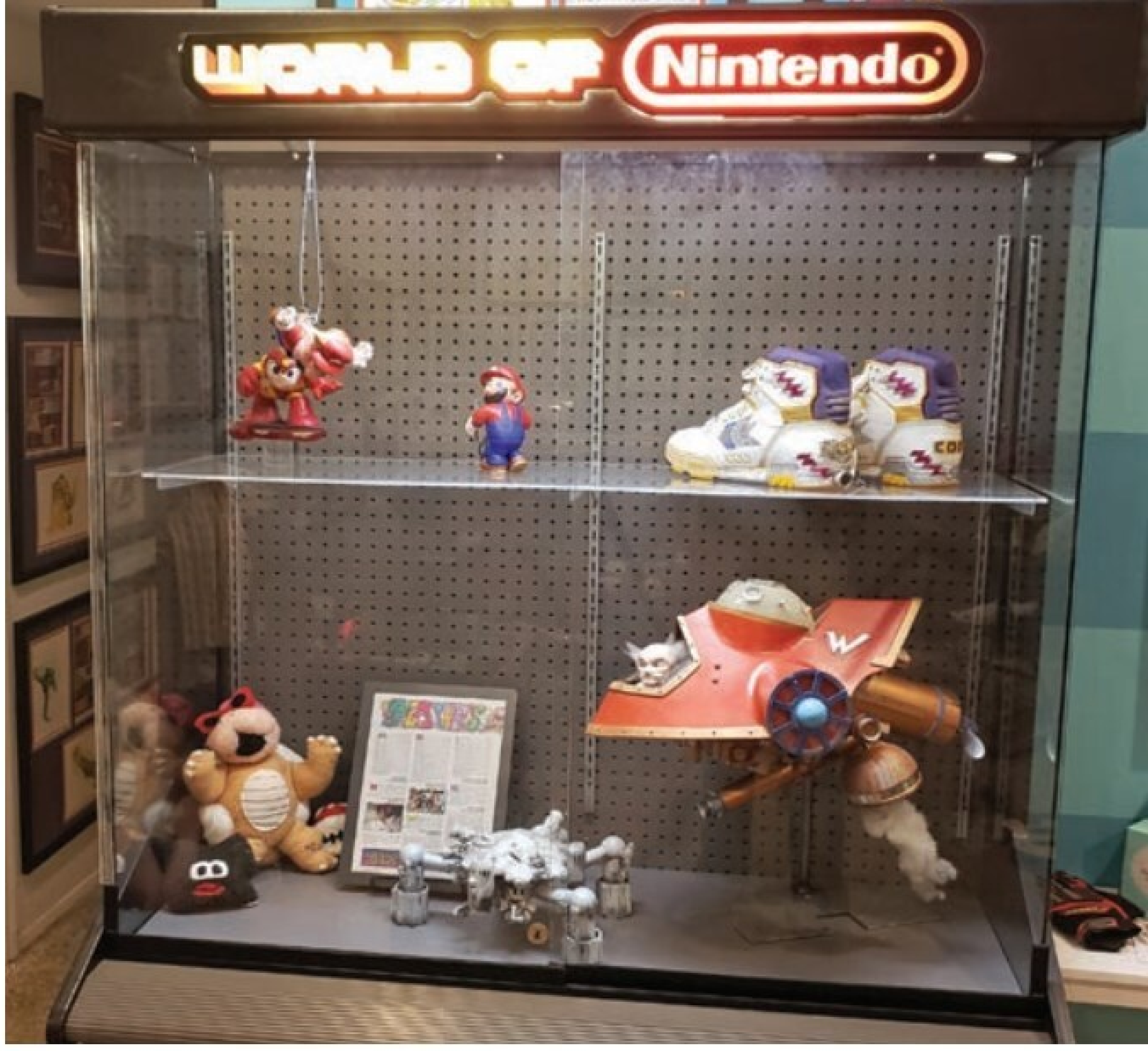
At this point, I'm collecting things I don't know exist until I find them, which is a very strange thing. I don't like using the word "historian," because I don't have an eight-year degree, but it does feel like a level of, to be corny, archaeology because I don't know what I'm going to find tomorrow, I'm not hunting for any specific thing. I'm discovering things every day.

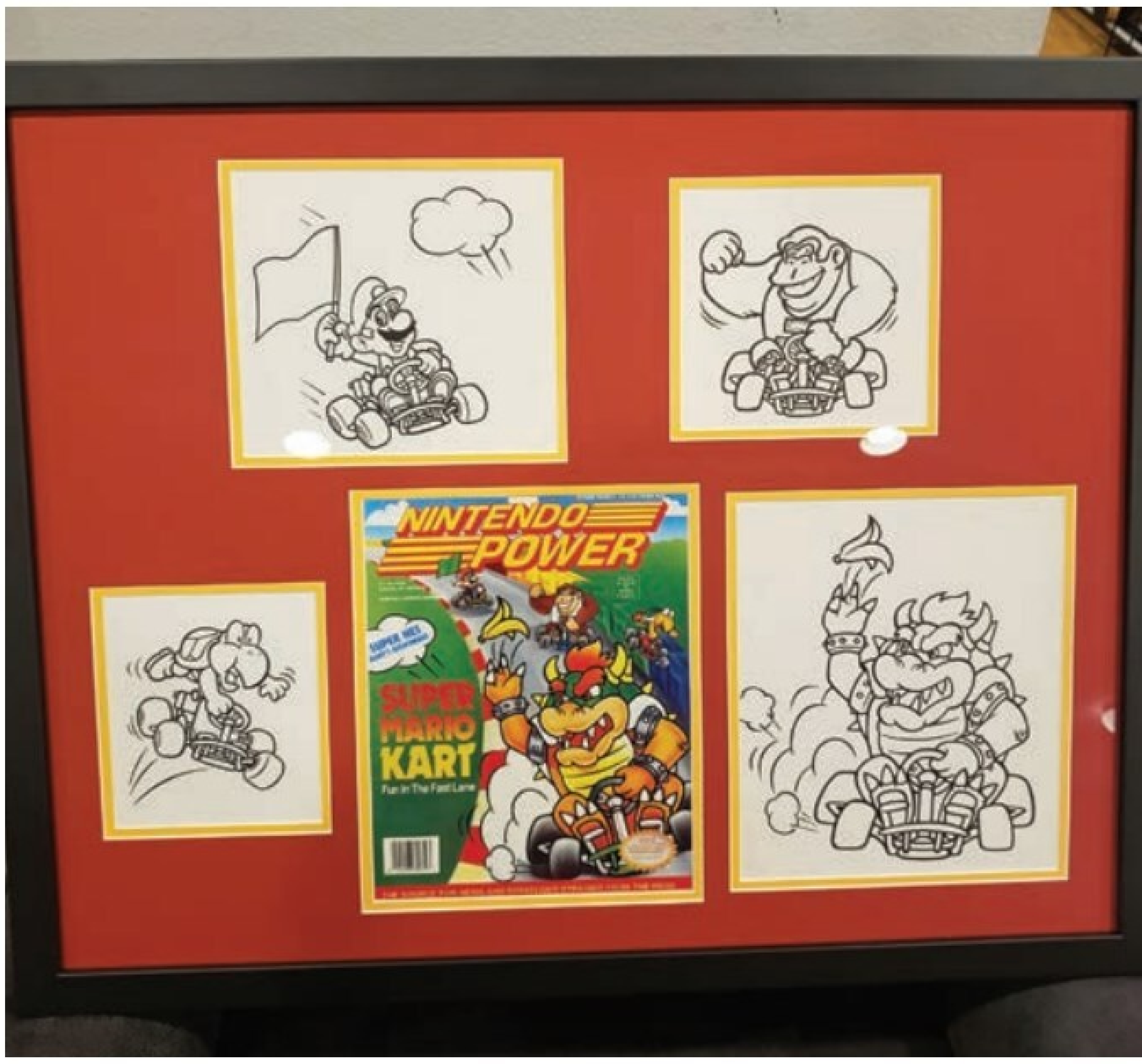
You talk about how the thrill of the hunt is what draws you to collecting. Is there any piece that has been the peak of that thrill that you don't think you'll ever reach again?

It's happened several times! Which makes it funny, right? Like, when I found the [rocket shoes on the cover of *Nintendo Power* Issue 3], it's like, "This is ridiculous! These should not exist! Why do these exist? This is the top of the mountain!" And then I found Wily [from Mega Man] and all those clay maquettes. I'm like, "Now I'm at the top of the mountain! Those should not exist! What the hell?" It's difficult to say, "Oh this is my prized piece," because really, my prized piece is the next one, and then the one after that. But those [clay maquettes] are definitely prized pieces right now because they're clay sculptures that survived 30 years when they were supposed to survive 45 minutes.

That thrill is obviously what motivates you, but it also seems like you're also driven by nostalgia to an extent. Are there any pieces you're more nostalgic about?

My copy of Stadium Events is far and above everything else, but it's not because of the monetary value. When my wife got diagnosed for the second time as stage IV, her life insurance policy activated as if she had died – it's called an accelerated death benefit rider, where if you make the definition of terminal, then you have the option of activating your life insurance policy as if you had died. She did that because she wanted to, rather than being like, "Hey, I'm dead, here's a bunch of money. Hope everything's okay!" She wanted to be a part of that. So, we bought this house, and she was able to enjoy it and be part of that. She ended up getting like half a million dollars, and we did all the responsible stuff and paid off our bills and put stuff for my daughter away for college. After all that was done, she had a nest egg and said, "I love you and you take care of me and you stuck by me through this. Some people would not have stuck by me through this." She was like, "I want you to get something: whatever you want."

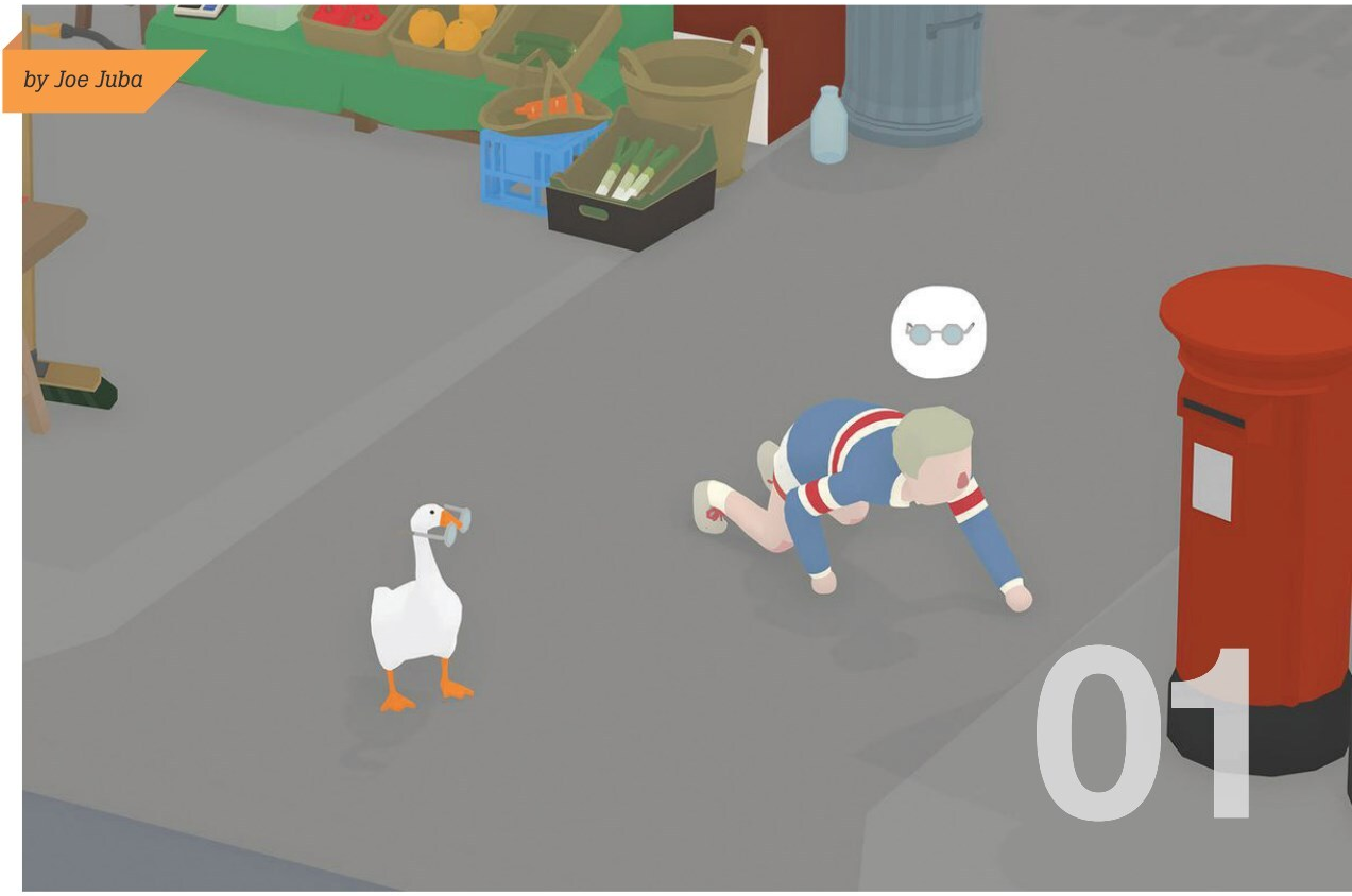




At that point, I had every single game in the NES library except for Stadium Events, so she bought me my copy of Stadium Events, which is no small thing – it's a very expensive game. So, when I say it's my favorite game, people are like, "Oh, you just like it because it's expensive." It really has nothing to do with that. If she had bought me Mario 3, it would have been that game. But yeah, that's my baby. Like, if I was going to sell everything, that would stay.

TOWNSPEOPLE

by Joe Juba

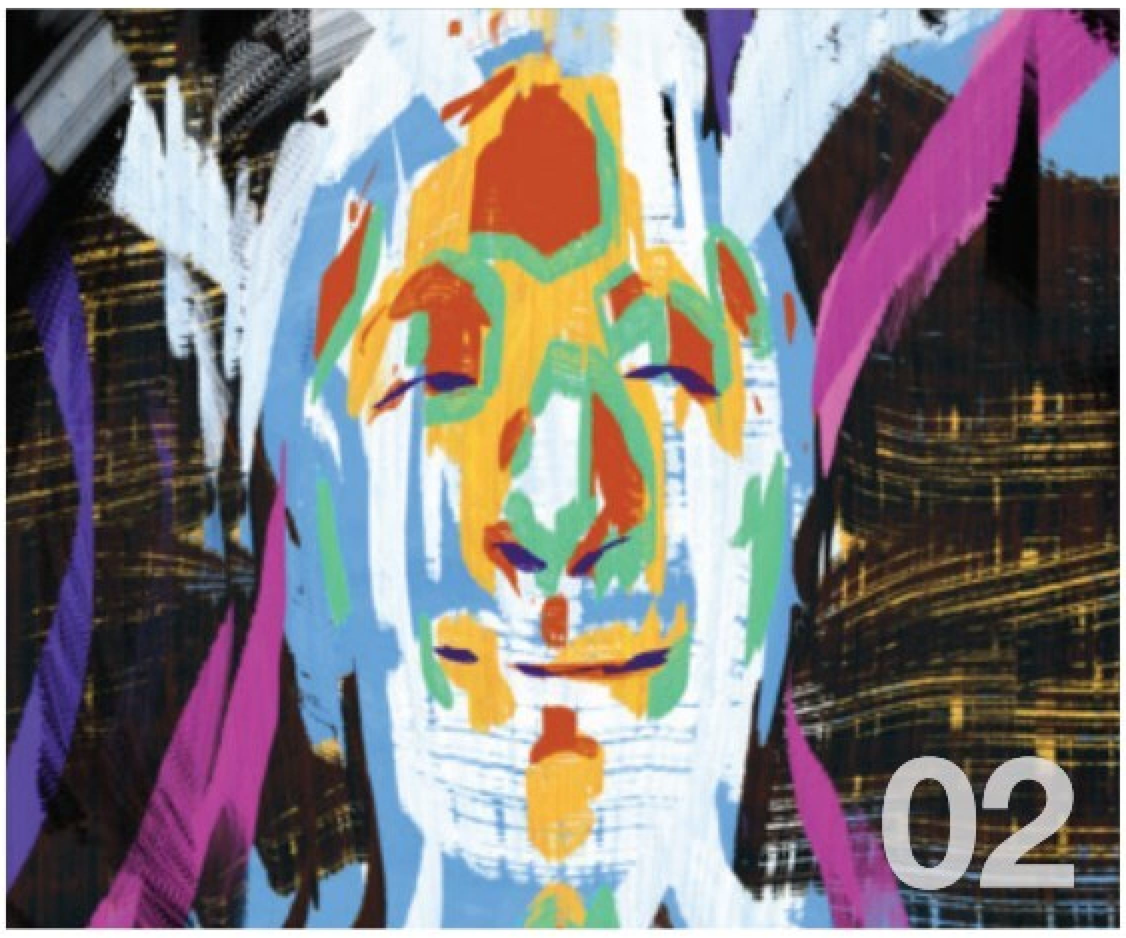


01

Glasses Kid

Untitled Goose Game

Incidental townspeople can be among the most charming characters in a game, and they do it without hogging the spotlight. No one demonstrates this better than the poor kid from Untitled Goose Game. While the goose briefly terrorizes him by stealing his glasses and chasing him into a phone booth, players feel lasting sympathy for the innocent boy who will probably be scared of geese forever.



02

Mega Rich Light-Bending Guy

Disco Elysium

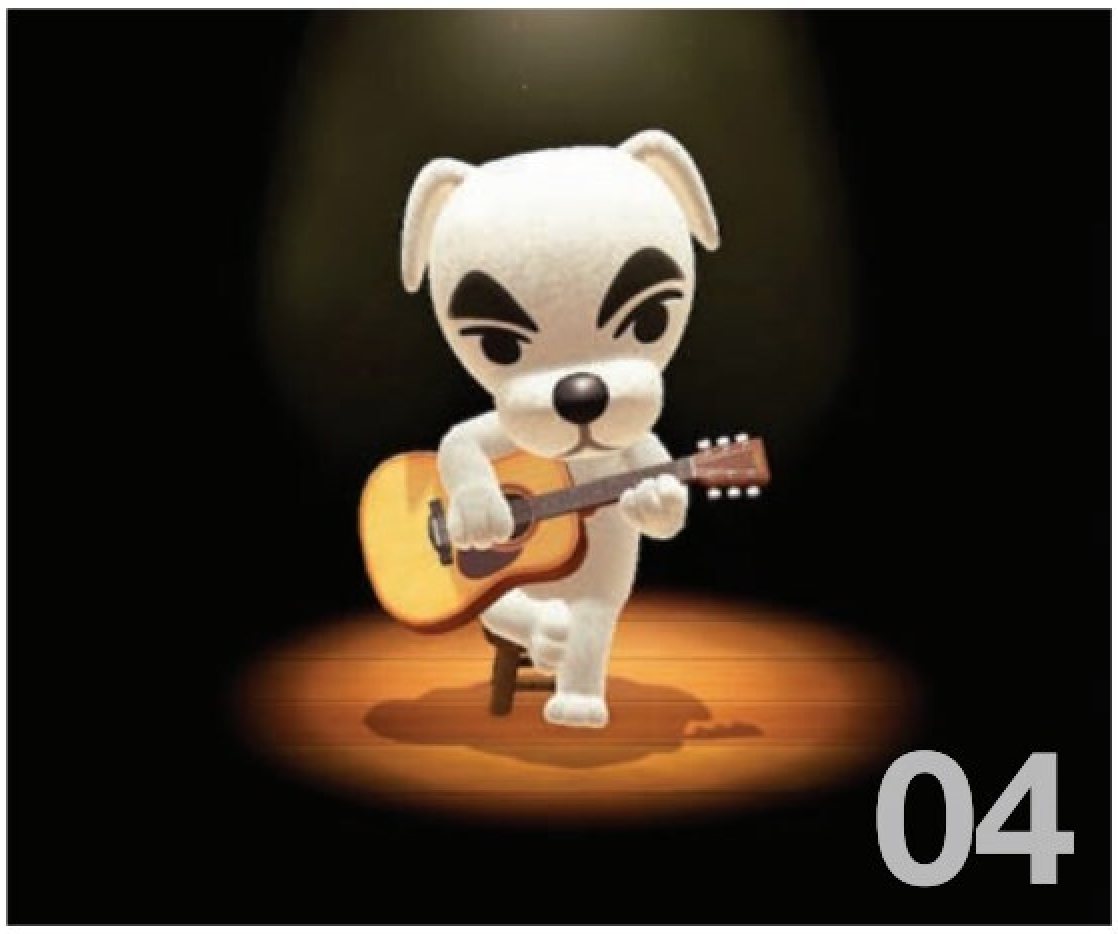
Locked away in a shipping container, this individual's net worth is so high that it distorts reality and alters the laws of physics around him. Though your conversation is short, it gives you a fascinating glimpse at the lives of the rich (and the plight of the poor) in Revachol.

03

Bella Goth

The Sims

You may have thought Bella and her husband Mortimer were just default townspeople to invite over for parties. However, over the course of the whole series, a side-story develops around Bella involving a mysterious absence and an alien abduction. Now that's neighborhood drama!



K.K. Slider

Animal Crossing

Have you had a rough day? Need to unwind with a little concert? K.K. Slider has you covered, delivering weekly jam sessions that showcase his improbably versatile repertoire. His chill attitude and peaceful tunes put your village at ease in way that only a dog with a guitar can.

Former Adventurer

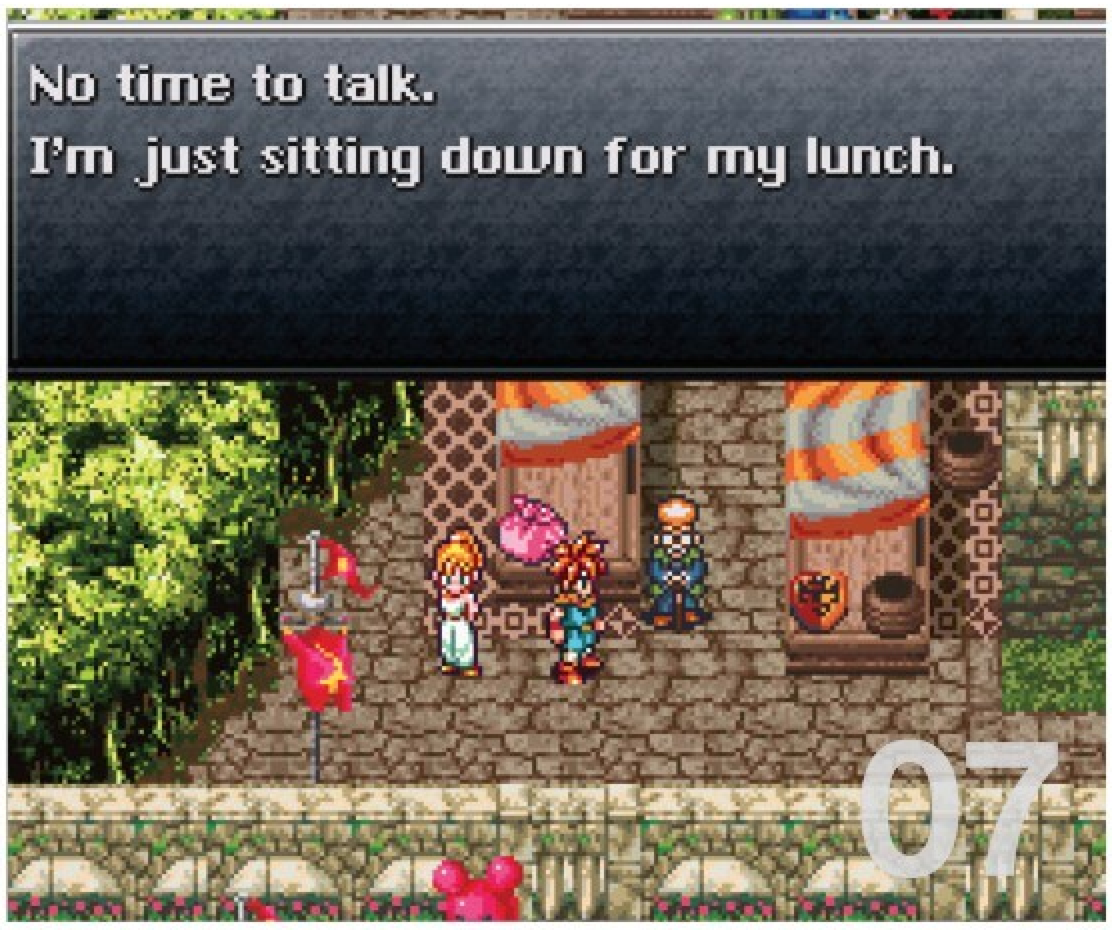
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

In his prime, this town guard undoubtedly fought fearsome creatures, explored ancient crypts, and hunted Daedric artifacts. But that was before. Now he's reduced to routine patrols, telling anyone who passes by that he used to be an adventurer until he took an arrow in the knee.

Flute Boy

The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past

Link first sees this Kakariko Village resident in a haunted grove, but the flute-playing apparition disappears. A trip to the Dark World reveals that the boy is slowly turning into a tree; when Link finds and plays his flute, the boy finds peace and the transformation completes.


No time to talk.
I'm just sitting down for my lunch.

Lunchless Man

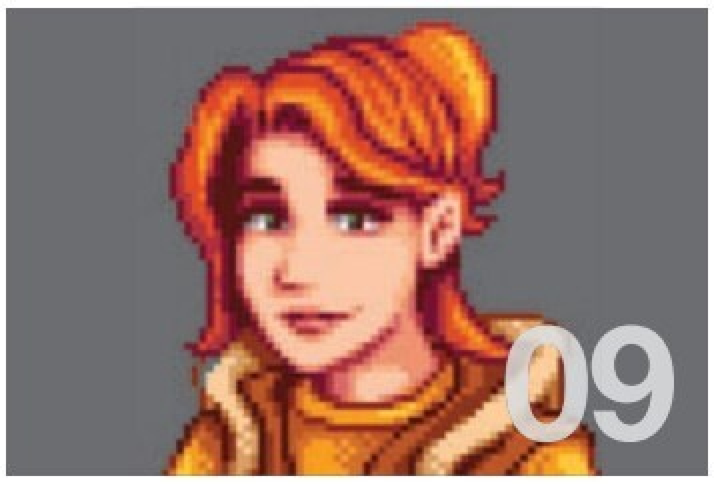
Chrono Trigger

Crono inspects a conspicuous sack on a table, and finds a whole meal that refills his HP and MP! Then he talks to a nearby man who is excited to eat the lunch his wife packed for him. Oops. Later, this man gets his revenge by testifying as a character witness against Crono during a trial.

Gavin's Friend

Red Dead Redemption 2

Your encounter with Gavin's friend is memorable because of its disappointment. Shouting Gavin's name, the man searches endlessly for his missing companion – but the mystery is never resolved. He (and the player) never definitively learns the fate of the "lovely feller."



Robin

Stardew Valley

Pierre's general store may be your source of daily necessities, but Robin is the one who does the hard work to take your farm to the next level. She builds almost all of your new structures and expansions, and each one only takes her a day or two of incessant hammering.

Ha Ha Ha…!

"Dancer"

Final Fantasy IV

Final Fantasy IV has many dancers in its towns, but when Cecil returns to the village he mercilessly raided in the game's introduction, he gets a nasty surprise. This alluring dancer is really a mage in disguise, and she turns Cecil into a pig to spite him and avenge her friends. ◆

FULL STREAM AHEAD

Affordable hardware options for serious streamers

by Alex Stadnik

1 Blue Yeti USB Microphone

In the wild world of microphones, streamers have the choice between XLR or USB mics. The former may have better audio quality, but it also requires more equipment. The latter is a more streamlined approach and is best for aspiring streamers because USB mics can plug directly into a computer and be ready to record. While there's a plethora of USB devices to choose from, the Blue Yeti stands above the rest. The device is loaded with streamlined features to make recording easy for myriad settings. It also comes with its own stand and can be mounted to a microphone arm. But all that would mean nothing if it didn't make your dulcet tones sound good. The Blue Yeti has some of the best vocal quality on the market, and at its current price point is one of the best options for people looking to enter the streaming game. Using it to podcast, I love how I can change the settings on the fly without the use of an audio mixer, and still feel like it's a marked upgrade over something like the Blue Snowball USB microphone.

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□

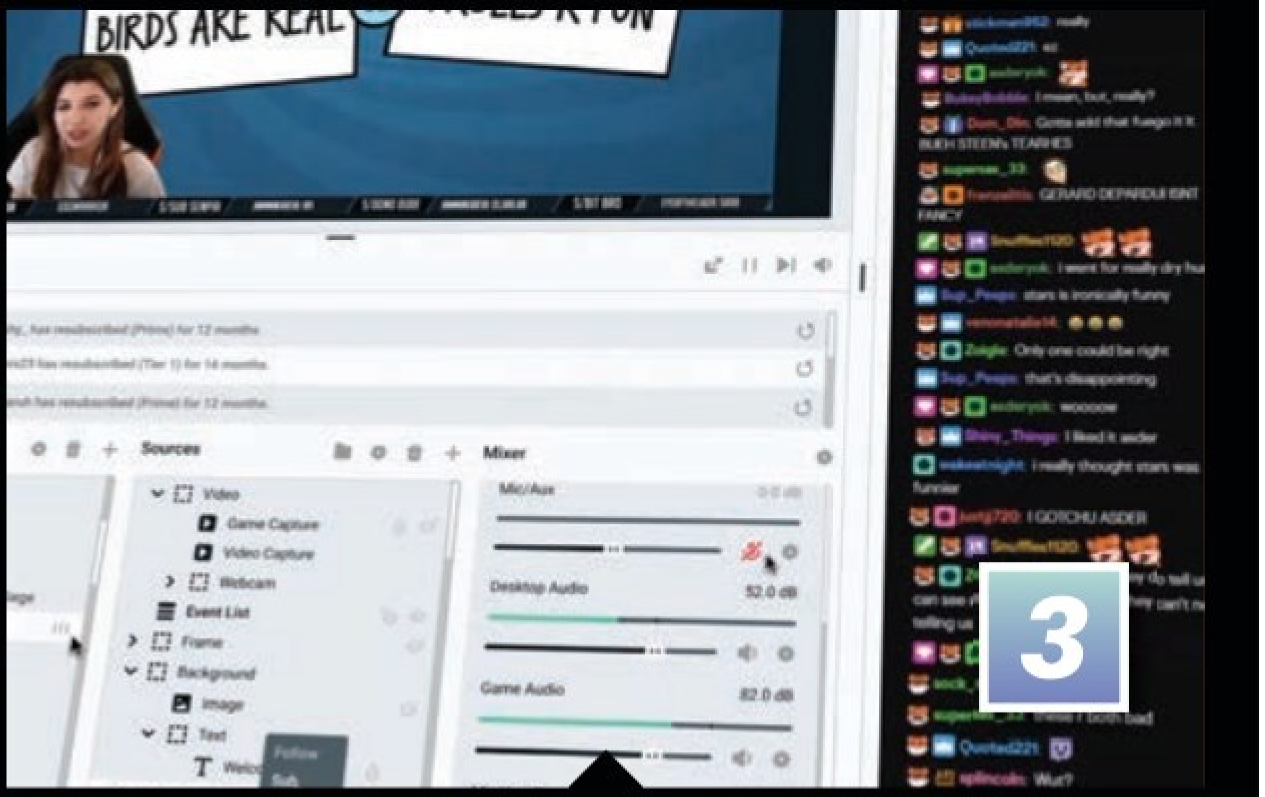
$129 | bluedesigns.com

2 Elgato HD60 S Capture Card

If you're like me, you're married to your PS4, Xbox One, or Nintendo Switch and haven't joined the master race of PC gaming. That shouldn't stop you from streaming, though, but to do that, you need a reliable capture card. In the same way Blue is the household name for mics, Elgato has been the king of the capture hardware game, and for good reason. The HD60 is about as simple as it gets when it comes to a console capture setup. The device is a midway point between your TV and system, connecting to the USB 3.0 port of your computer, that allows you to stream to your channel. Users can expect all the HD trappings of 1080p and 60 frames per second along with a cleanly designed app that everyone from newcomers to wily vets can use. The only downside is the audio delay if you're jacked into your computer, but solo streamers won't have to worry if they just focus on the game instead of interacting with other people on the stream.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$179 | elgato.com



3 Streamlabs Streaming Software

Whether you're streaming games from your PC or console, Streamlabs is an easy-to-use video capture software that keeps improving with each update. While still in beta, Streamlabs uses a clean, contemporary design that meshes well with its streamlined features, creating an easy environment for people to configure their streams. With helpful descriptions for each scene and setting, new streamers will find it effortless to setup a layout and configuration that works best for them.

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□

Free (Prime Membership is $12/month) | streamlabs.com

logi
HD 1080p
4

4 Logitech C920 HD Pro Webcam

Sounding great is essential for a good stream, but looking the part is also important. If you want to maximize video quality without paying over $100, I recommend the Logitech C920 HD Pro Webcam. While it doesn't feature the visual flexibility of its big brother, the C920 records at a crisp 1080p at 30 frames per second and is adaptable to whatever lighting situation you find yourself in. Working from home, It's been my webcam of choice, as it's able to keep me focused and stand out in the midst of my dimly lit basement office. If you are looking for a bit more flexibility when it comes to FPS, I suggest moving up one level and purchasing the C922 webcam. It affords users the ability to capture in 720p at 60 fps along with the normal full HD setting. ◆

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$79 | logitech.com

Maximizing Your PC And Internet Setup

While you don't necessarily need to spend thousands to have the greatest rig man has ever built, there are certain requirements Twitch recommends for both your hardware and internet. The baseline requirements for streaming on a PC are an Intel i5 processor and 8GB of RAM. If you're looking to stream and play from a single PC, you'll want to make sure it's up to the task by boosting your tech (our studio computer has an AMD Ryzen 7 2700X Eight-Core Processor, NVIDIA GeForce RTX 2070 Graphics Card, and 16GB of RAM). If you're looking to build a computer to match these specs, I recommend checking out a good computer part picker site or going to your local electronics store. There, you'll be able to customize your rig in a way that works best for you and your budget while also talking with associates who can take you through the nitty-gritty details.

What's almost more important than your computer setup is your internet connection. You're sending your glorious gameplay moments and sparkling personality into the world, so you want to have a consistent and reliable upload speed that supports around 7-10 megabytes per second if you're looking to stream at full HD. Combining this with your glorious new PC will make streaming a breeze on the backend and give your audience a better viewing experience.

DISTRACTING ENGAGEMENT

FIDGET, BUILD, AND SPIN TOYS FOR BUSY HANDS

Whether stuck on your couch waiting for matchmaking or at your workstation checking email, these toys are ideal choices if your mind thinks best when your fingers are active

by Matt Miller

1

PIXL

From the creators of the now-classic original Fidget Cube (which remains a great gadget), PIXL is a miniature magnetic building toy that creates any crazy shape or design you dream up, in 2D or 3D form factors. Small enough to not take up a lot of space, the wide variety of colors and block sizes allow for infinite permutations. A free digital companion app offers support with pre-made and community designs, and can even convert pictures to block layouts. You can also just as easily fiddle until you design your own masterpiece. A starter pack contains 40 pieces in a variety of block sizes.

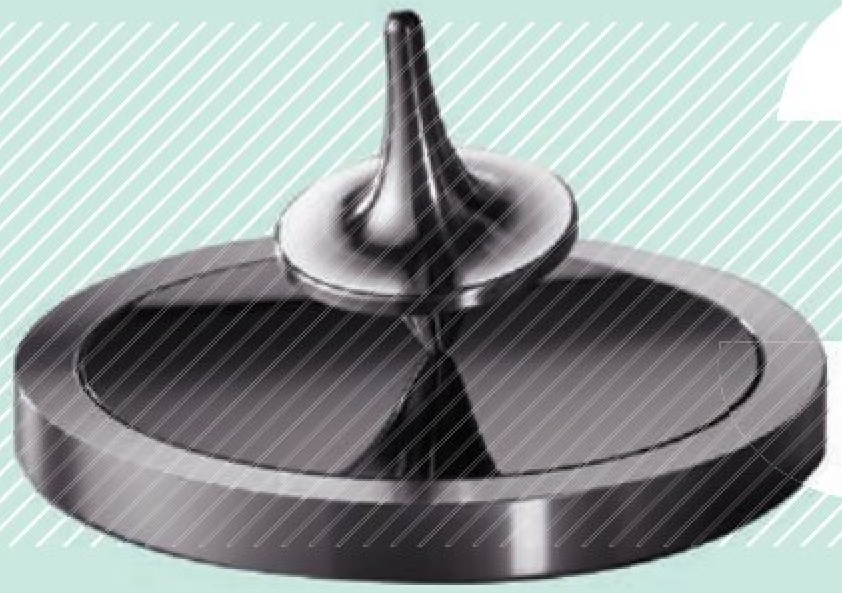
$29.99 | antsylabs.com

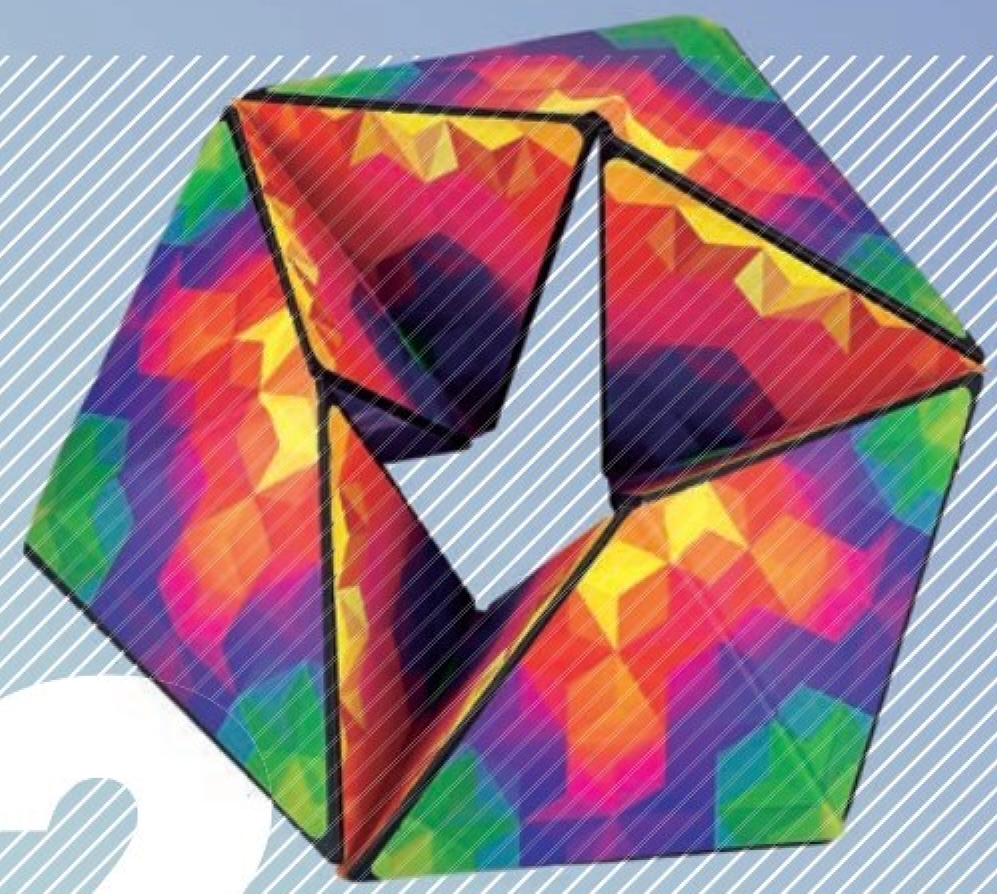
3

FOREVERSPIN TOPS

If you'd like a touch of class with your amusement, there's no better option than the precision-machined spinning tops from ForeverSpin. Elegant and attractive to look at, mastering the perfect spin technique to keep these tiny toys going for minutes at a time is fun. Available in a wide variety of metals and finishes, each has its own feel and weight. You can't go wrong with titanium.

$47 (Titanium Top), $39 (Spinning Base) | foreverspin.com





2

KARMAGAMI

This relaxing kalidescopic sensory toy comes in different color patterns, but they all create the illusion of an endless tunnel folding in on itself. You can rotate the Karmagami forwards and backwards in an infinite loop. The polygonal shapes and simple folding motion work great for any size hands, and the affordable price point is an ideal solution if you're on a budget.

$7.99 | funinmotiontoys.com

4

FINGEARS MAGNETIC RINGS

Available in multiple finger sizes and eight colors, FinGears rings use magnets to allow for an array of spinning tricks and dexterity games. Individual rings are attracted to and rotate around one another, and the effect is both relaxing and allows for skill-building if you get really engrossed. A single set gives you plenty to fidget with, while multiple sets allow for more involved games, like magnetic billiards.

$21.99 | fingears.com

GETTING STARTED WITH ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

by Matt Miller

Across a wide variety of genres and playstyles, these inexpensive box sets are built for newcomers ready to dive into the fun of tabletop storytelling adventures, and each one includes virtually everything – dice, rules, first adventure, player aids – that you need to get going

1

D&D
ESSENTIALS KIT

This stellar introduction to Dungeons & Dragons includes a smartly structured adventure that gradually takes you through many facets of the game. The box also contains dice and a number of attractive cards and handouts to help bring the fantasy to life. You even get a cardboard DM's screen to hide your secrets behind. Of special interest, the set offers advice for playing with just one Dungeon Master and a single player, and optional rules for sidekicks, which is a boon to best friends, couples, or parent/kid pairings that are trying to get their feet wet before joining a bigger group. This is the best way to learn the world's original and most popular RPG.

$24.99 | dnd.wizards.com

2

STARFINDER BEGINNER GAME

High-production values, ample bonus materials, and gorgeous, plentiful art set this premium boxed collection apart. After all, just because you're starting out, it doesn't mean you don't want high quality. Starfinder's creative premise sees players taking their characters to explore space stations and visit strange alien planets, all while wielding a mix of high magic and technology that perfectly blends science fiction and fantasy tropes. Offering the option of pre-generated characters or the chance to craft your own, and both a dry-erase-friendly grid map and stand-up pawns for tactical encounters, this is a perfect option for groups looking to encounter surprising creatures and engage in rich combat encounters.

$39.99 | paizo.com

3

NUMENERA STARTER SET

Imagine our civilization has risen and fallen, and hundreds of millions of years have passed on Earth, with numerous other species and visiting aliens having populated and also passed on. A billion years later, humans somehow reappear, and explore the detritus of those many fallen worlds – impossibly advanced science and tech that can only be understood akin to magic. That's the idea in this light-on-rules role-playing game, which focuses on narrative depth, told in a weird and unrecognizable version of Earth's future. Pre-gen characters, map, and cards are fun additions, but it's the intuitive ruleset and the master class in world-building that makes Numenera a perfect alternative for play groups looking for something unusual and surprising.

$24.99 | montecookgames.com

STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS – BEGINNER GAME

If you prefer your storytelling games set in a galaxy far, far away, you'll be happy to hear that the RPG based in the Star Wars universe is excellent. Using custom dice with unique symbols, the game creates a narrative framework that matches the breakneck pacing and tone of a Star Wars action scene, where one good outcome can often come with unexpected side effects, both positive and negative. This beginner box offers some memorable pre-generated characters and a fun adventure on Jakku, set during the sequel trilogy timeframe. When you're ready to graduate to other adventures, three distinct and fully featured RPG branches are available: Force and Destiny (think Skywalker Saga), Edge of the Empire (think Solo), and Age of Rebellion (think Rogue One). ◆

$29.99 | fantasyflightgames.com

4

STUC

AT HOM

K

E

GROUNDED, Obsidian's micro-scale survival adventure, was an unusual leap, even before social distancing came into play

by
JEFF CORK

» PLATFORM
Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Simulation
(4-Player Online)

» PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

» DEVELOPER
Obsidian Entertainment

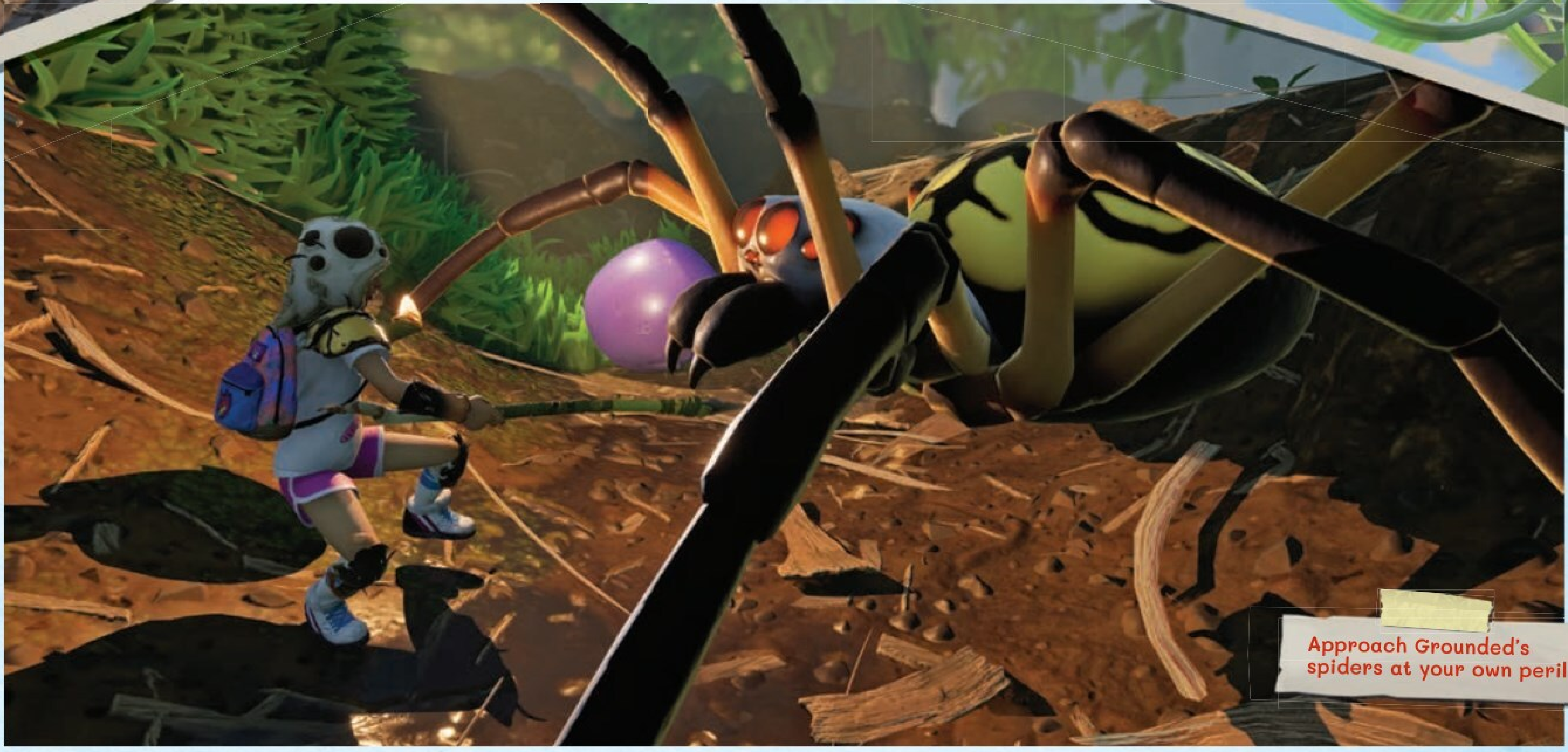
» RELEASE
July 28 (Early Access and Game Preview)

THIS IS NOT NORMAL

I'm under a leafy canopy, or, more accurately, I'm under a leaf. It's the size of a wedding tent. Behind me, I hear a rustle. I whirl around and catch a glimpse of a pudgy green creature. It's immediately beset upon by what looks awfully close to an SUV-sized ladybug. The smaller critter scurries up a towering plant, safely out of attack range. I follow the path of its vertical escape, until I'm temporarily blinded by the sun. Then I spot something hazy far away, but eerily imposing. Is that a house?

That's a question I'll ponder later. Right now, I have more immediate concerns. Glancing at a device on my wrist, I can see that I'm hungry and thirsty. Neither of the two creatures I've seen so far look particularly appetizing, so I set out for something to eat and drink. Heading through the dense forest, which I now realize is actually a lawn, I reach a discarded juice box roughly the size of a double-decker bus. A few yellow drops have dribbled out of its straw, and I eagerly slurp them up. Looking over the box, I see it's Punch-O brand, featuring a cartoon character of a fruit-themed police officer. I don't know what Tropicop is, but it's tasty, topping off both my hunger and thirst meters. Before I walk away, I notice printed on the side of the carton is the expiration date, "Best by 09-90."

OK, seriously. What's going on here, anyway?



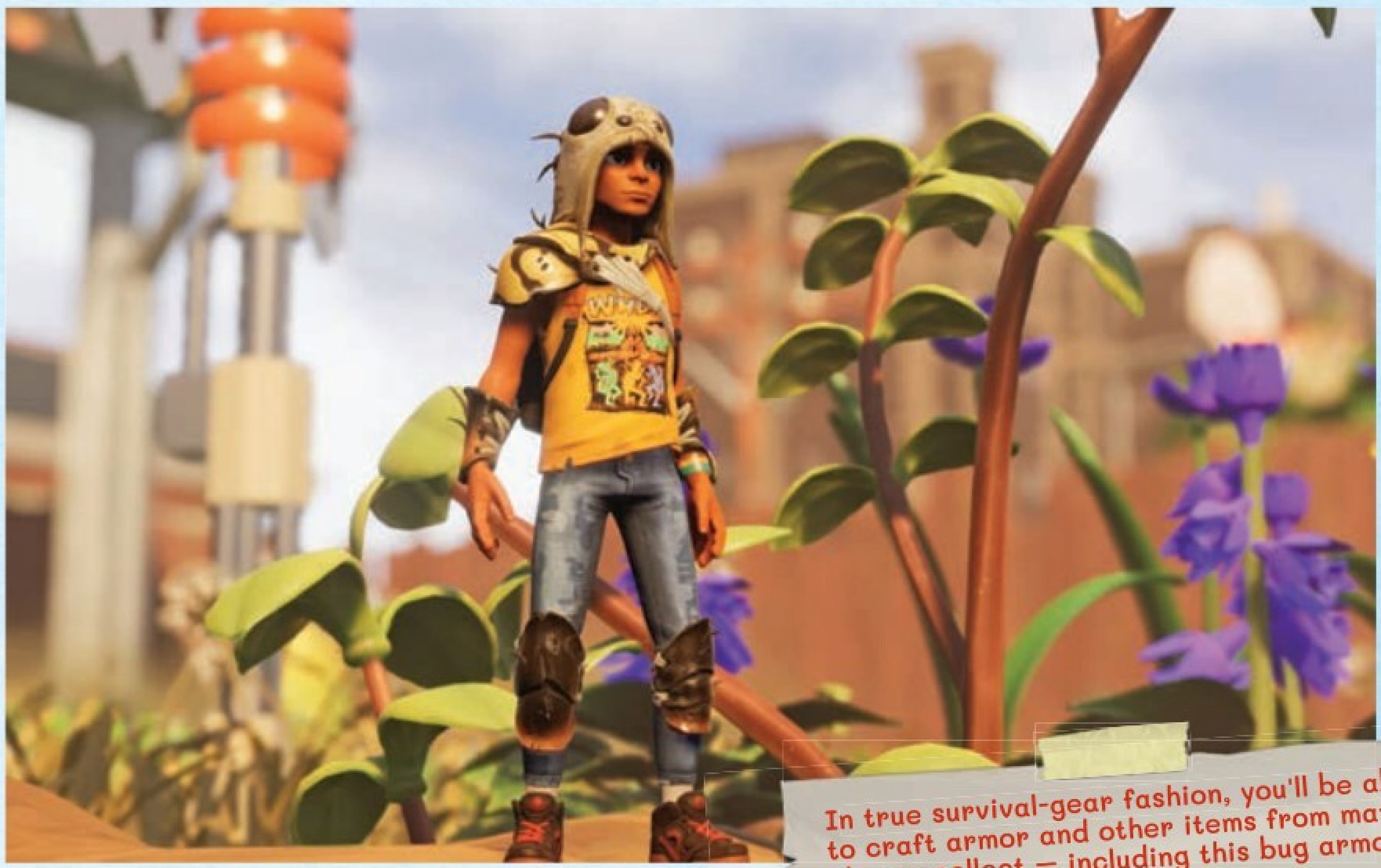
Approach Grounded's spiders at your own peril

Obsidian Entertainment has worked within a wide array of worlds. The studio's focus has always been on RPGs, but its output over the past 15 years proves how much variety can exist within the genre. Obsidian has worked with high-profile IP like Star Wars and South Park, via Knights of the Old Republic II and The Stick of Truth. It put its own spin on existing game franchises, with Neverwinter Nights 2 and Fallout: New Vegas. And original games including The Outer Worlds and the Pillars of Eternity series have earned the studio critical and fan acclaim. It's a diverse lineup, to be sure, but a small team within Obsidian wanted to try something a bit further out there after work on Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire wrapped.

"I think for RPG developers, there's a lot of intrigue with survival games," says Adam Brennecke, Grounded's game director. It makes sense. While it may not be immediately apparent, the two genres have some overlap. The stakes in survival games are generally less lofty – saving yourself versus all of humanity, broadly speaking – but the focus on systems, world-building, and the gradual acquisition of power are quite similar. Brennecke says he was always personally interested in making a survival game, and he was in good company. Former project director Richard Taylor, who left Obsidian to work at Blizzard, even built a prototype for a survival game "years and years ago," Brennecke recalls.

"We were kind of looking at that and thinking, 'Hey, if we were going to reboot that prototype and try our own thing, is that the right direction to go in? Should we try something else?'" Brennecke says, recalling the conversation he had with Deadfire's lead designer, Bobby Null. They had sat together for a few hours one day, brainstorming potential directions. After going through the fairly standard setups like desert islands and plane crashes, the pair decided to come up with ideas that hadn't yet been done. "What if you were more like an Indiana Jones take on it, where you had to survive in an ancient tomb of some sort or a pyramid with jungle elements you could explore?" Brennecke says. "We were both riffing off each other. What if you were small?"

That last idea seemed special. "Immediately, as designers we got a lot of cool ideas in our heads like what you could do with it," Brennecke says. Obsidian co-founder and studio head Feargus Urquhart encouraged Brennecke to put together a pitch and assemble a small team to explore the idea further. Brennecke grabbed some people who he'd worked with on both Pillars games ("We were a really tight team and worked really well together," he says), and they put out their own prototype. Null was pulled into an unrelated project, but the game that would eventually become Grounded got the go-ahead. And now, about two years later, this small team of about a dozen developers is ready to give a closer look at what they've been working on.



In true survival-gear fashion, you'll be able to craft armor and other items from materials you collect – including this bug armor

TINY STEPS FORWARD

I'm still not sure how I got where I am, but one thing is certain: I won't be alone. A few minutes after I began exploring this strange new world, my co-workers Ben Reeves and Leo Vader join the game. There won't be as much juice to go around, but it also means I'll have plenty of help establishing our home. Within a few moments, we intuitively start to fall into different roles. We find a fairly large clearing in the shadow of an abandoned baseball, and Leo starts laying out what will become our base. Meanwhile, Ben and I pick up the tiny plants, pebble fragments, and other various components scattered about.

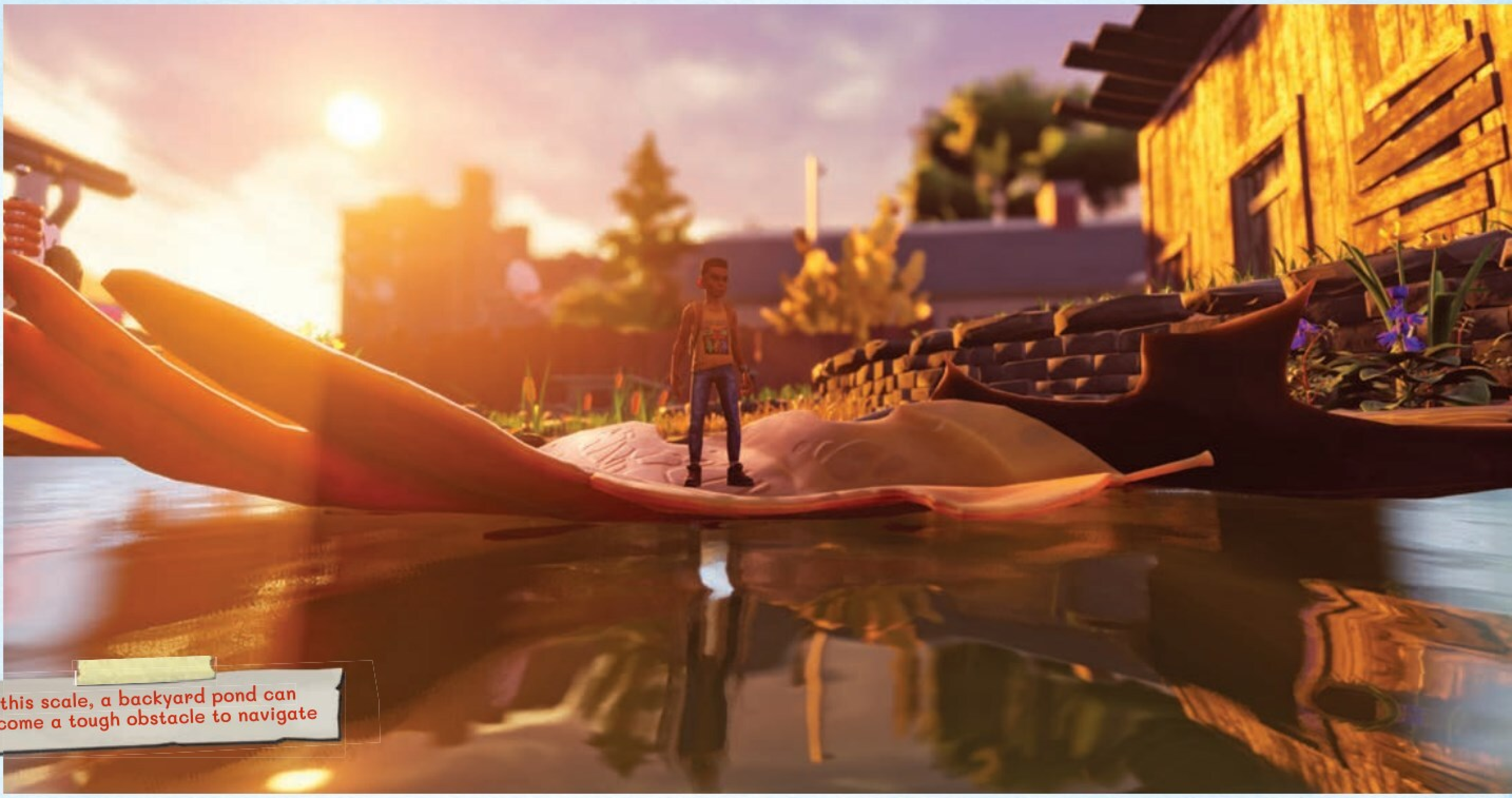
I see more aphids as I gather materials, including several of their dead bodies. It looks like not all of them were as nimble as the first one I saw. Obsidian is doing its best to bring real-world interactions into the world of Grounded, such as how ladybugs hunt down aphids. "Whenever we can tie something that an insect actually does to something in our game, we try our best to do it," says systems designer Andy Artz. That includes ant behavior, and how they communicate through pheromones on their never-ending search for food. Time will tell if we're considered food.

Meanwhile, ladybugs' ravenous appetites can throw off the balance of this mini ecosystem. Once you craft a roasting spit, you're able to eat aphids, too. If too many ladybugs live near your home, it can cause problems. "You can end up with an aphid shortage and a situation where you don't have enough food," says lead environment artist Sean Dunny. "Then you need to venture out beyond your usual radius to find something, unless you kill all the ladybugs in the area and the aphid shortage stops being an issue."

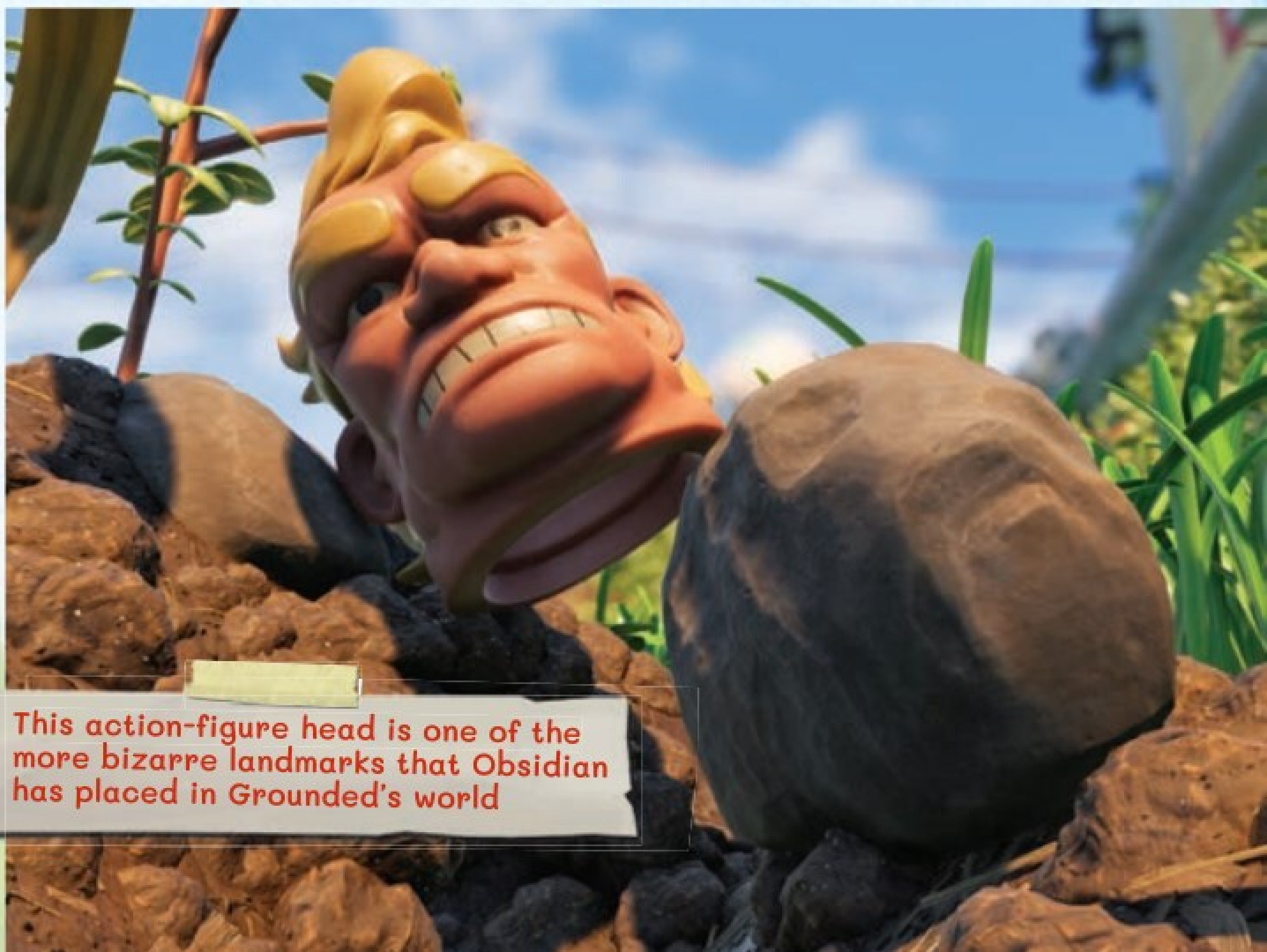
Bug behavior and setting aside, the early moments play out like many other survival games. I'm able to craft a crude axe with some of the stuff I find, which lets me chop down blades of grass. It takes several whacks, with each strike taking a miniscule nibble from the grass until it topples over like a mighty tree. After the stalks hit the ground, they turn into several planks, which is an important building material. I stack some cut lumber and head back to our clearing.

Leo isn't building the walls, doors, and stairs that will become our base. Instead, he's setting space aside for all these building parts, which then show up in the world as ghostly silhouettes. When I walk over to these, I'm able to add the required materials from my inventory. It's a pretty slick system that makes cooperative building a lot easier than if we all were to follow our own muse. While Leo continues to space out our base's second floor, Ben and I shuttle back and forth with materials. If you looked at this all from above, I'd imagine we looked a lot like ants.

Later, I mention the building system to Brennecke, and he immediately credits Endnight Games' The Forest for the inspiration. "It's one game that we really, really



At this scale, a backyard pond can become a tough obstacle to navigate



This action-figure head is one of the more bizarre landmarks that Obsidian has placed in Grounded's world

enjoyed playing as a team," he says. "I feel like Grounded is almost like the second generation of survival games, so we also have a chance while we're developing Grounded to take a look at all the survival games that have come before us and look at all the ideas that they've had and walk through how did those other games come to their solutions in their game design."

We're playing an early build, so some features are missing. One of the notable ones is the character voiceovers. At the start of the game, you pick from one of four kids. They have their own personalities (see sidebar), which are communicated through spoken dialogue. "One thing that we rely heavily on is character banter," Brennecke says. "It's something that we've seen in other multiplayer games that we like; I think the inspiration really comes from a Left 4 Dead-type game, where you have four players and they're all riffing off of each other while you're fighting." Eventually, kids comment on what other characters are doing, and relationships evolve over the course of the story.

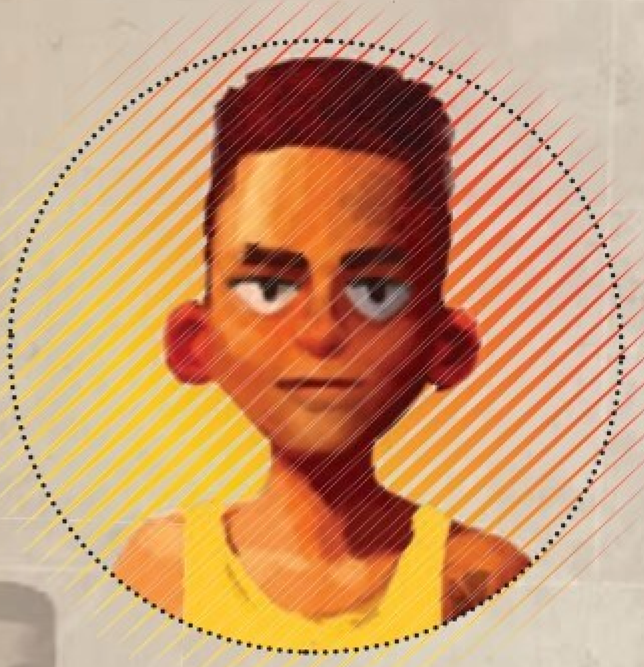
Our base is coming along nicely, when a strange voice crackles in my ear. It identifies itself as BURG.L – whatever that means – and seems as confused about our shrunken situation as we are. The voice tells us to head over to a nearby computer, where we'll be able to return to our normal sizes. I head over to the nearby waypoint while Leo and Ben continue construction. There, I find a tiny computer. I flip the computer on, and three pylons fire blue energy beams onto a pad. At least, that's the idea. They're all in various states of disorder, which means I have to do a little hustling if I'm hoping to deshrink.

The first beam is easy; there's a blade of grass in its path, which I quickly chop down with my axe. The next two are a little trickier, since they're both misaligned. Fixing the next one is a fairly simple matter of scaling up the pylon and flipping a breaker. I can't climb up such a sheer surface, but I'm able to leap from a branch onto its cord, and then ascend to the objective. Up here, I get a much clearer view of where I'm at. It's a big backyard, with an oak tree near the middle. There's a fence way off in the distance, with what looks like a gas station on the other side. That gas station's placement isn't a coincidence, either.

Obsidian is meticulous about setting and world-building, and Grounded is no different. Every manmade object in the game has an in-universe reason for being there, Brennecke says. In the case of things like juice boxes and other trash, you can blame much of it on the gas station's young clientele. "A lot of garbage is hucked over the fence from jerk teens and stuff, like half-eaten hot dogs and things like that," says senior artist Mitch Loidolt.

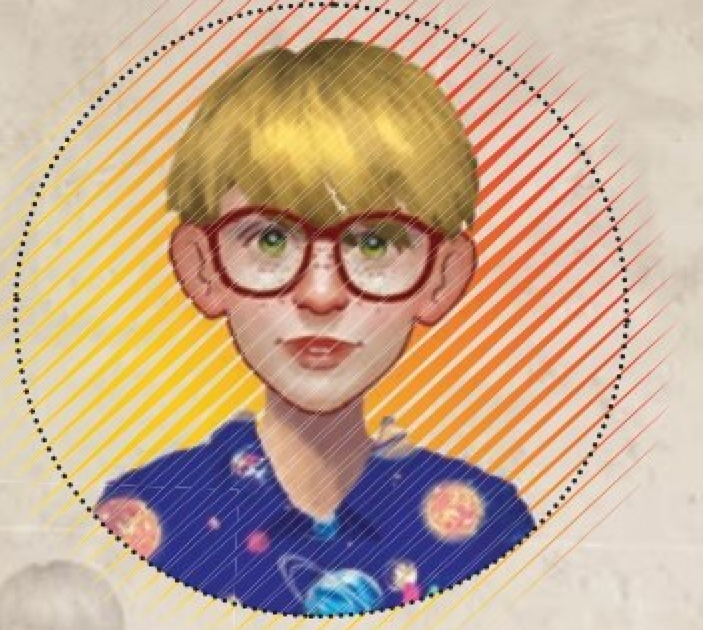
MEET THE KIDS

Players pick one of four kids when they start Grounded. They don't have any differences in terms of stats or abilities, but are entirely about personality. The kids are familiar with each other when the game starts, but they're definitely not what you'd call friends. Here's how game director Adam Brennecke describes the cast.



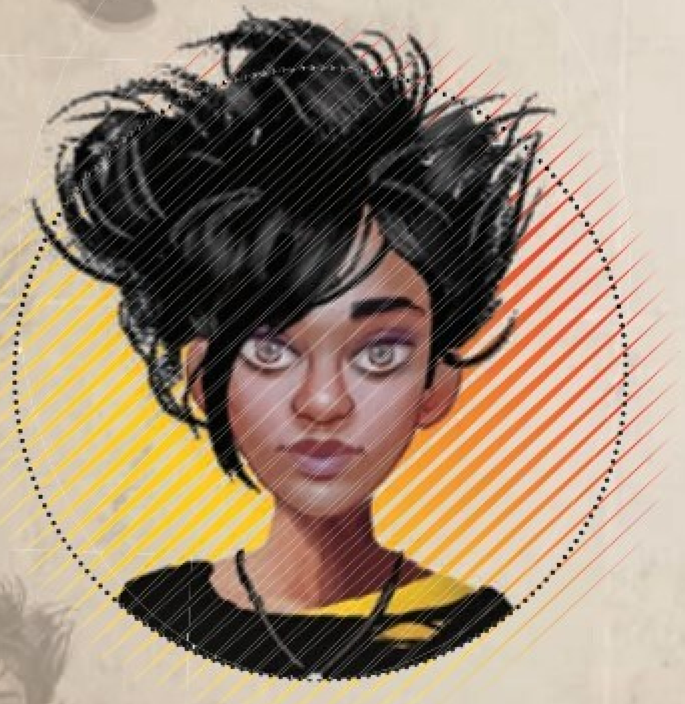
MAX

"Max is the character with the tank top, the first character. He's like the jokester of the group. I say he's a cross between Will Smith in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and Bart Simpson. Like everyone, he is a little bit of a nerd, so he has some nerdy things that he likes. He likes comic books, and he also plays video games — like everyone."



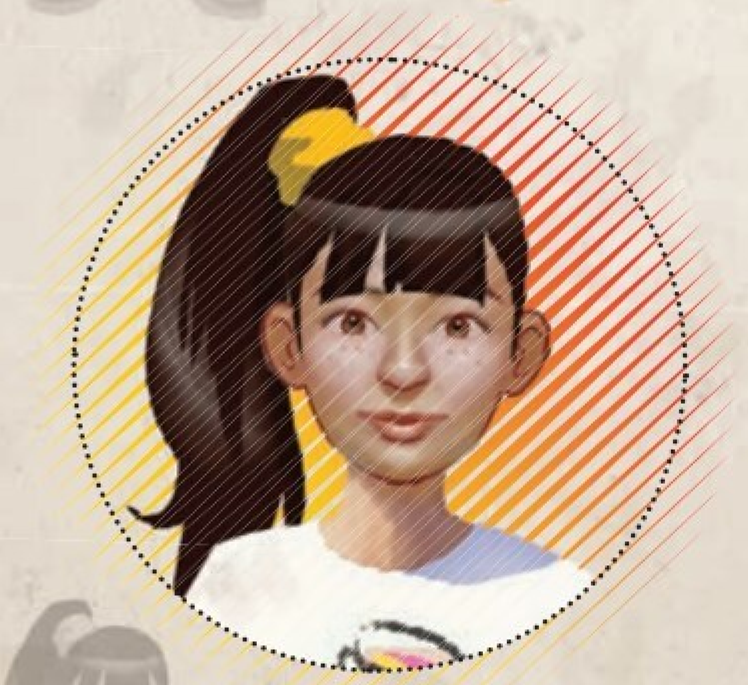
PETE

"Pete is the nerd of the group, as you can tell. He's a little bit younger than the other kids, because he did so well and actually jumped a grade. He's in the same class as the rest, but he's a little bit younger. He's really a big nerd, where he's into Dungeons & Dragons and Lord of the Rings and loves to read, but he's kind of the expert at surviving and understanding the bug life of the yard."



WILLOW

"Willow is probably the most mature out of the group. She is into music; her T-shirt design is from a band that she really likes, which is called Sad Stab. The T-shirt design is amazing; it's so good. She is definitely more of a mature teenager compared to the rest of the crew. She wants to move on and grow up, while the rest of the kids are maybe a little less mature and want to have fun as kids."



HOOPS

"She's the athlete, she plays basketball. Because of her sports background, she's somewhat of a natural leader. She takes the lead in the group."

Obsidian says player feedback from Grounded's Early Access and Game Preview will help shape the game's trajectory

A LITTLE FIGHTING

The final beam also needs some attention, but BURG.L issues a warning: It's in mite territory, so I might want to craft some weapons and armor first. Before dealing with that grim scenario, I decide to have a little fun. I leap off the pylon, which is a few feet off the ground – or what would probably be fatal fall damage for my size. Right after jumping, I equip a tuft of dandelion fuzz that I grabbed on the way, using it to glide safely to the ground like a miniature Mary Poppins.

I don't know who (or what) BURG.L is, but I'm not going to ignore its advice. I pull open the crafting menu to see what kind of armor options are available. When we first started base construction, I chopped down a little clover. Doing so gave me the recipes for a set of clover armor – certainly not top-of-the-line stuff, but better than nothing. I scrounge up the materials I need for it and ready up.

Back at base camp, Leo decides to do some exploration of his own. He ventures off toward the oak tree and finds a bonanza of new materials. Naturally, in addition to things like thistle thorns and sap, he stumbles on a source of acorns. As he collects these materials, my recipe book is populated with some of the potential new creations. Acorns sound like a natural fit for armor, and while they can be used for that purpose, it's probably not how you were thinking. Let's put things into perspective.

"One thing that's going on with our scale is it's actually smaller than a lot of people think," Dunny says. "When we added acorns to the game, people were like, 'Oh, you can wear an acorn top as a hat!' No, it's actually larger than you are." The characters in Grounded are about a centimeter tall. That's larger than the titular kids in *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*, but it's still quite tiny. That made conceptualizing props and materials that were usable for Grounded's characters a little tricky at

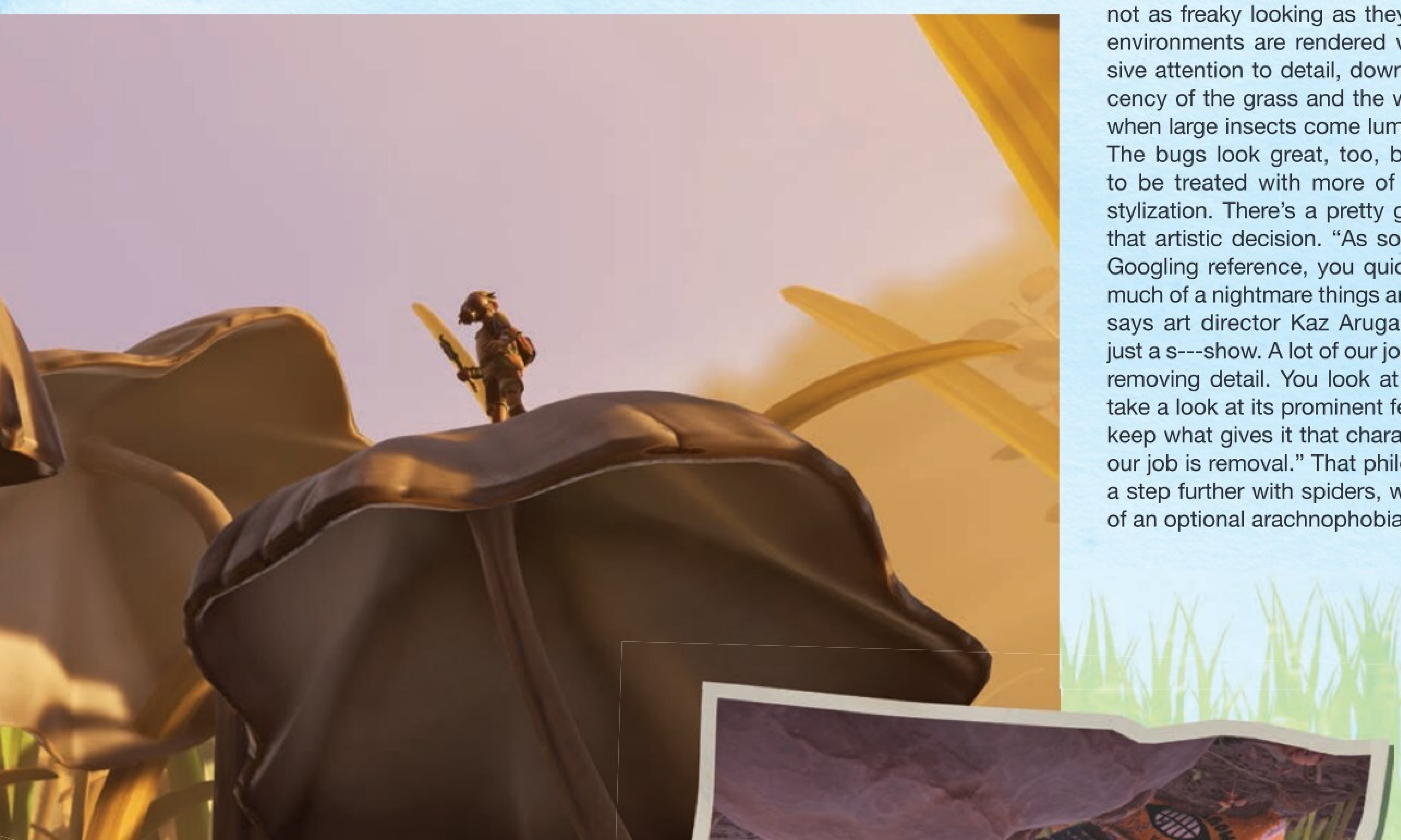
first. Thankfully, Dunny says a team member came up with a clever visual aid. "One of our programmers actually printed out little paper figures of one of the characters in the game at scale, and they were actually really useful from an environment-art perspective, because I could grab a battery or something from the office supply room and say, 'OK, how big is this compared to the character?'

At my scale, the final pylon is a bit of a hike away. I see several insects while making the trip, including another ladybug and a weevil. Things are going well, until a red ant crosses directly in front of me. I'm not sure which way this encounter is going to go. The ant creeps toward me, then pauses. It's about the relative size of a large dog, which makes its behavior all the more appropriate. Its head cocks to the side inquisitively, as if it's sizing me up. It must not think I'm a threat, because it walks away without engaging me further. I'm glad that this didn't end in combat, even though I had the foresight to craft a spear.

Ants are generally interested in two things: food and the colony. They're on a constant search for consumables, which can include any food that you have stashed away in your base. Don't be shocked if you come across one raiding your food supply; they're not big on personal boundaries. If you're so inclined, Obsidian says you can follow the ants back to their hill, where you can see them drop your stuff in their own hoard. I'm impressed that Obsidian takes the ecosystem that seriously, but since the ants don't seem too interested in me, I'm happy to leave them alone.

I wish I could say the same for the mites. When I finally reach the pylon, I realize that BURG.L wasn't lying. These red creeps are everywhere. They look like chubby crabs, and their leaping attacks chip away at my health. Alone, they don't seem to be dealing a whole lot of damage, but they have an annoying tendency to cluster in groups of two or three. I poke at them with my spear, wiping them all out eventually. They're gathered around the entrance to a tunnel, which is where the pylon's power cord is buried. It's dark, but I light up the path with a torch I crafted. A few more mites later, and I'm able to flip the final switch. Success! Now that all the beams seem to be working properly, BURG.L tells me to return to the computer. You don't have to tell me twice!

The mites are certainly annoying, but they're not as freaky looking as they could be. The environments are rendered with an impressive attention to detail, down to the translucency of the grass and the way that it parts when large insects come lumbering through. The bugs look great, too, but they appear to be treated with more of an eye toward stylization. There's a pretty good reason for that artistic decision. "As soon as you start Googling reference, you quickly realize how much of a nightmare things are at that scale," says art director Kaz Aruga, laughing. "It's just a s---show. A lot of our job is actually just removing detail. You look at a creature and take a look at its prominent features and you keep what gives it that character. So a lot of our job is removal." That philosophy is taken a step further with spiders, with the addition of an optional arachnophobia mode.



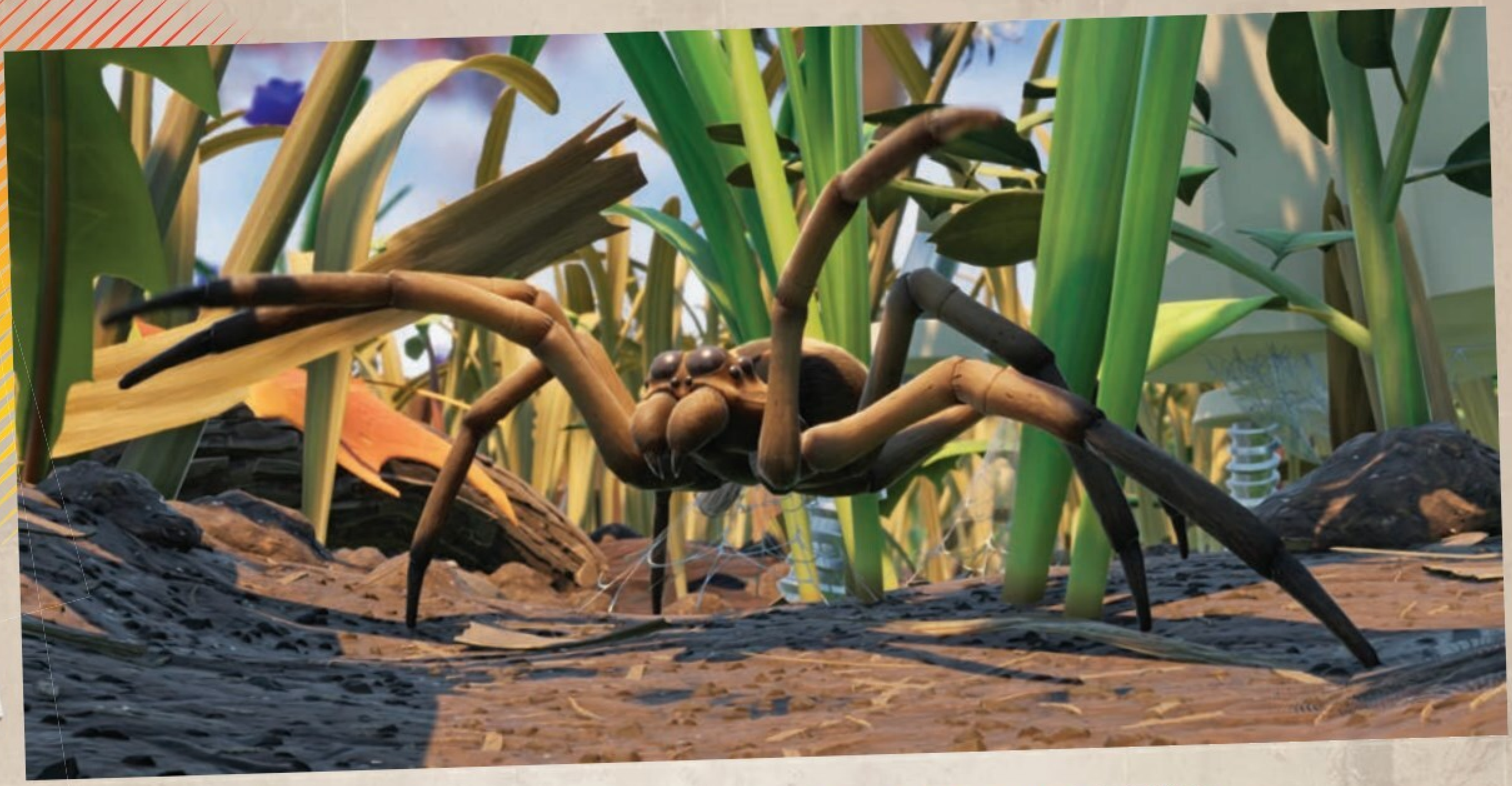
THE JOURNEY HOME

I haven't yet seen a spider during my trip, but that's about to change. I hear a telltale "clickety clack" sound from behind some grass, and I assume it's an especially excited ladybug. What emerges from the foliage is, well, it ain't great. The spider's body is about the same size as the ladybug, but I can tell that it's not nearly as docile. It moves around in a very spider-y way, and I crouch down hoping to avoid the gaze of its eight eyes. It turns away for a moment, and I seize the opportunity: I sprint off until my stamina is depleted. The creepy spider music has stopped, which comes as a tremendous relief. These are Grounded's apex predators, and I'm betting my puny clover armor wouldn't provide much in the way of protection.

During my escape, I was struck by how uneven the terrain was. It's not as flat as I would have assumed a game that takes place largely on a lawn might be, even considering the scale. Aruga tells me later that the world was initially flatter, and the team took several passes to rough it all up, adding clumps of dirt and other debris across the landscape. "That was a breakthrough moment for me in terms of the feel of smallness," he says. "We also spread out a lot of clutter that helps break up the silhouettes of stuff, and that kind of gives it a different dimensionality."

And there is a lot of clutter. Once my heart has resumed its normal rhythm following the spider incident, I start making my way back to home base. Along the way I find a titanic box of breath mints. I hit the box with my axe, and the plastic flap opens. I don't have the right tools to harvest the mints inside, but it does look as though they offer some new crafting possibilities. Breath mints, juice boxes, and even the discarded heads of action figures all serve their purpose in Grounded. It's something Brennecke traces back to an earlier project.

"Going back to our experience working on Fallout: New Vegas, one thing that we felt that was really important in New Vegas was when the player spins around at any point in the wasteland, they should be able to see three landmarks that are identifiable, with different silhouettes, so they can use that as a triangulation for where they are in the wasteland," Brennecke says. "It's just kind of a helpful thing to be able to guide the player through an open-world game. That's something that as a team we've looked at, we need a lot of manmade objects in the world.



ARACHNOPHOBIA MODE?

Spiders have become a dependable enemy type in fantasy games. While few of us look forward to battling giant creepy-crawlies (and invariably getting stuck in their webs), the presence of spiders — even fake ones — can be a real problem for some players. Obsidian decided to come up with a solution.

Technical designer Jerrick Flores says they realized there was an issue when they released Grounded's first trailer. "It was kind of interesting but also concerning that when that spider reveal happened, there were a number of people who in the reaction videos they had all this interest in the game, but when that came up, all that interest just completely evaporated. They'd say things like, 'I can't play this game.' It's not like 'I won't,' but 'I can't.'"

Flores and programmer Brian MacIntosh have been working with Microsoft's User Research Labs to figure out how best to address those concerns. "We asked him, 'What is it? Is it the legs? Is it the eyes? What can we just remove?' And he said unfortunately it seems to be something a little deeper, where if people identify it as a spider, as long as there's enough evidence for them to say that's a spider, that seems to be what triggers it," MacIntosh says. "I thought that was super interesting, though unfortunately it makes the job a little harder."

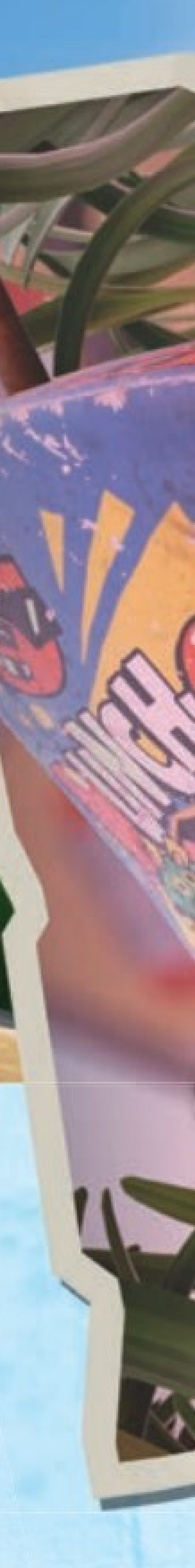
The solution was a user-selected Arachnophobia Mode, which alters the appearance of the spiders on the client side, meaning that other players in a multiplayer game will still interact with the default spidery spider. In its current implementation, spiders are replaced with bulbous, legless orange shapes. They still behave like the regular spiders in the game, but they hopefully won't make spider-averse players unplug their systems when the creatures appear.

"That's ultimately what we want as developers, people playing the game," says game director Adam Brennecke.

One, it's just fun to find those things, because you never know what you'll find, and we try to find ways to make them interactive in some way or adding to the gameplay in some way. Adding those landmark locations helps you figure out where you are in the world, which is really key to helping the player navigate – especially with our tall grass."

Some objects, like the baseball, are just there to serve as landmarks. Others, like the Punch-O boxes, have some gameplay or survival elements attached to them, like being a source of food. Brennecke says there are still other objects that have been put into the world because they're fun to play around with. For instance, there's a magnifying glass, which creates a blazing-hot refraction point that moves with the sun's position throughout the day. Then there's the Frankenline, which is (bear with me here) a Frankenstein-themed Etch-A-Sketch knockoff with bolts near his ears that allow players to draw. "Two players will have to manipulate it in order to draw, and then you have a third player directing the design," Brennecke says. And no, there's no real purpose for the device, other than having fun; you won't be using it to signal for help.

Grounded's team has a healthy enthusiasm for silliness, but they've also had to account for a lot of things players might take for granted. There's a day-night cycle, but what about weather, like rain? It's not as easy as you might imagine. "How do we do that technically, because it can't just be a particle effect on the screen now?" asks senior programmer Roby Atadero. "It has to be actual objects. And do these objects hurt you? Can you drink them? A lot of things like that have been something we still want to figure out a way to do this, but it's not as straightforward in how you integrate it."



It's not weather, but Aruga says that there currently is a "death from above" kind of object within the game. Acorns can drop from the tree, and they will damage players who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He's not sure if they'll stick around for the final version, because they're still trying to get a sense of how players will feel if they get killed by something they didn't see coming.

Reflecting on my journey as I get close to home, I realize that there's one thing I didn't see while I was atop the pylon. "The thing I always say that makes the team groan is, 'I'd love to have a dog, and then you could climb up it like Shadow of the Colossus, and you could get on its back and fight fleas or something.'" Brennecke says. "That would be my dream, but I know that it's an impossible dream."

"Oh, that would be a creature bigger than almost every model in the game, aside from the house, so how do we do that?" Atadero asks.

SPIDER TIME

I'm ready to report my success to Leo and Ben, when I come home to a disaster. A ladybug apparently found its way inside the base and smashed it apart from inside like a wrecking ball. Perhaps we should have shored up our perimeter defenses, too. Of course, that's easy for me to say, since I wasn't there to watch any of it happen.

Regardless, it's the moment of truth. BURG.L tells me to stand on the shrink pad. Done and done! The beams align, the camera pulls back dramatically to show off what I'm certain is my inevitable rebiggening, and then … there's a popping sound and a bunch of purple smoke. That's obviously not what I was hoping for here. I head out once again to see if I can't help troubleshoot this latest development.

One thing I'm learning to appreciate about Grounded is that it doles out objectives while allowing players to mess around if they like. For example, while I've been following the story path, Leo and Ben have been having their own adventures. Leo has crafted a bow and arrow, and has focused on farming gnats and building higher-tier creations such as a moisture collector.

"There's at least always something that directs you somewhere, and if you're getting frustrated or want to engage more with the story, it's not very difficult to figure that out," Atadero says. "That's one thing we want to make sure that we have in our survival game is not to be too open, where after a couple of hours you don't know what to do and stop playing. We always want to make sure that you have a path forward."

That path forward leads me toward the oak tree. I grab a quick slurp of juice and venture toward the waypoint, which, I should note, is cleverly measured in centimeters. I'm a few meters away when I notice what looks like an abandoned burrow. Not one to miss out on an adventure, I drop inside and start exploring. I pull out my torch and follow the winding dirt path forward. It's oddly devoid of any insect life, which is both a relief and a little strange. The end of the tunnel opens up into a large cavernous space with what looks like a, well, I'm not exactly sure. A spaceship? Some kind of undersea-lab-looking thing? Whatever this thing is, it's obviously not part of the tree's roots. A wall is blown out, and I step inside.

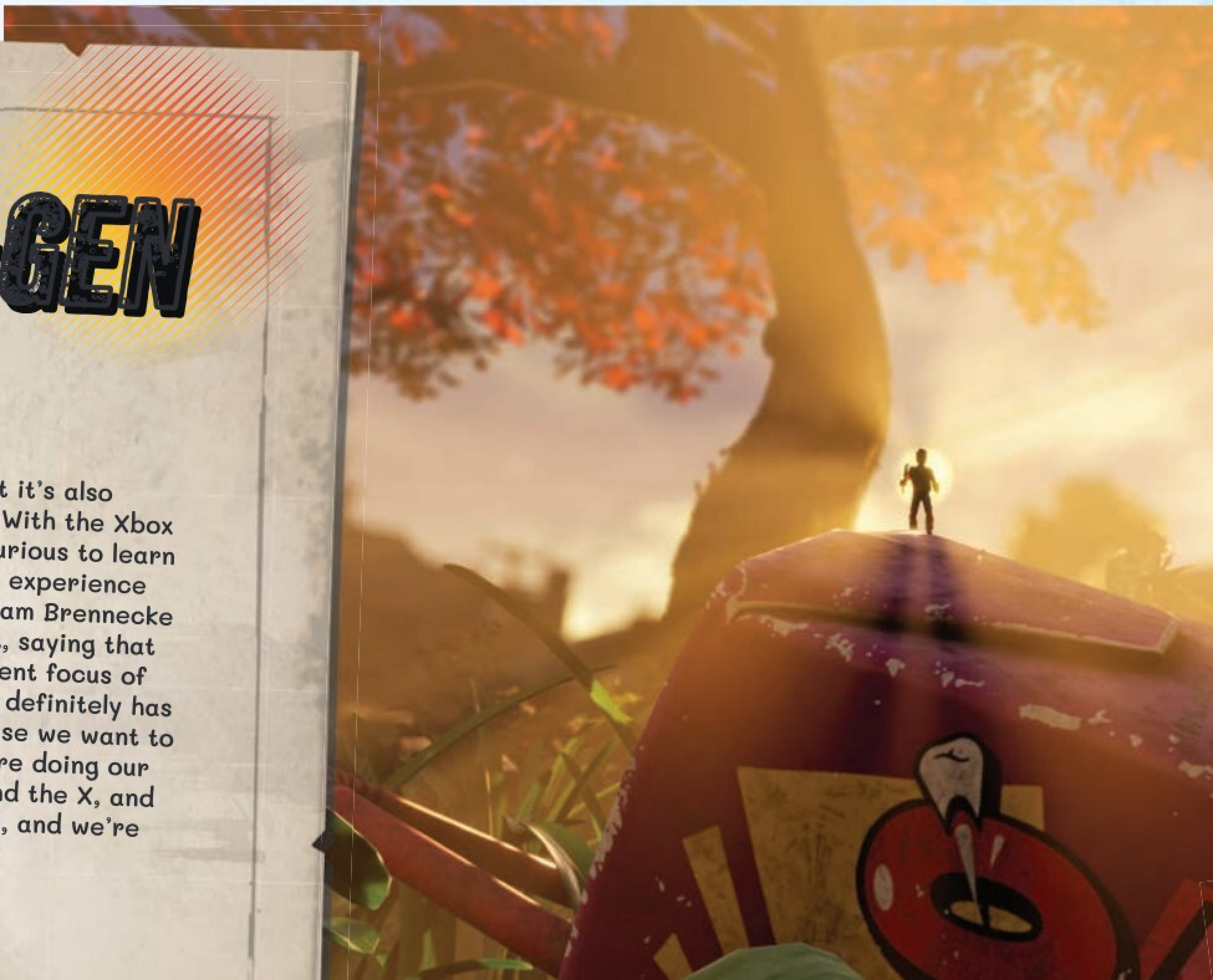
It's a high-tech kind of place, or at least the '90s version of high-tech. Panels of lights blink on and off, and other weird-looking machinery hums along, doing whatever it is that it's doing. And then I see something laying on the floor. It's BURG.L! And it's some kind of robot. I interact with it, and manage to turn it back on. It whirrs back to life, thanking me for the help. It's kind of adorable, with a spatula for one hand, and a bent antenna on its head. It looks a lot like a toy robot from the era, with beige plastic and rainbow accents. But what does it want?

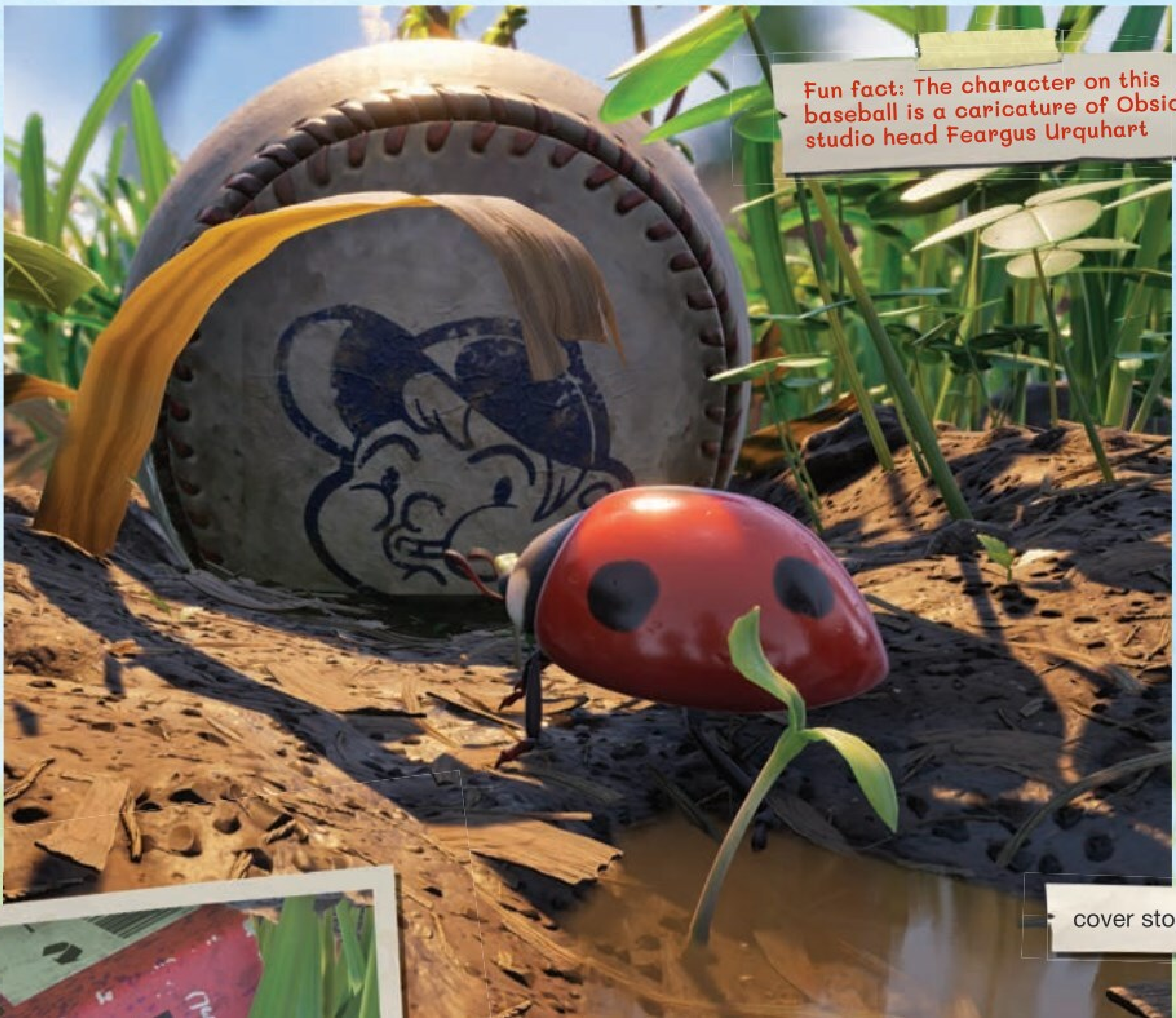
BURG.L tells me that the batteries are completely drained, and that I need to travel to the satellite labs and divert power back to this station. I don't have much of a choice here, so I head back up and into the world. Along the way I pass by a room featuring four 9-volt batteries and another with what I can only guess is some kind of power core. As much as I'd love to continue exploring, that's where this little adventure has to end.

I have so many questions, most of which Brennecke seems to delight in not answering. Why did we shrink? Who's BURG.L, really? And whose house is this, anyway? I ask if we're the first people that have been shrunken, and if there are any tiny human skeletons to discover. "You didn't find those?" he asks, and I can't tell if he's joking or not. He's clearly not going to share the solution to these central mysteries quite yet, but I had to at least ask.

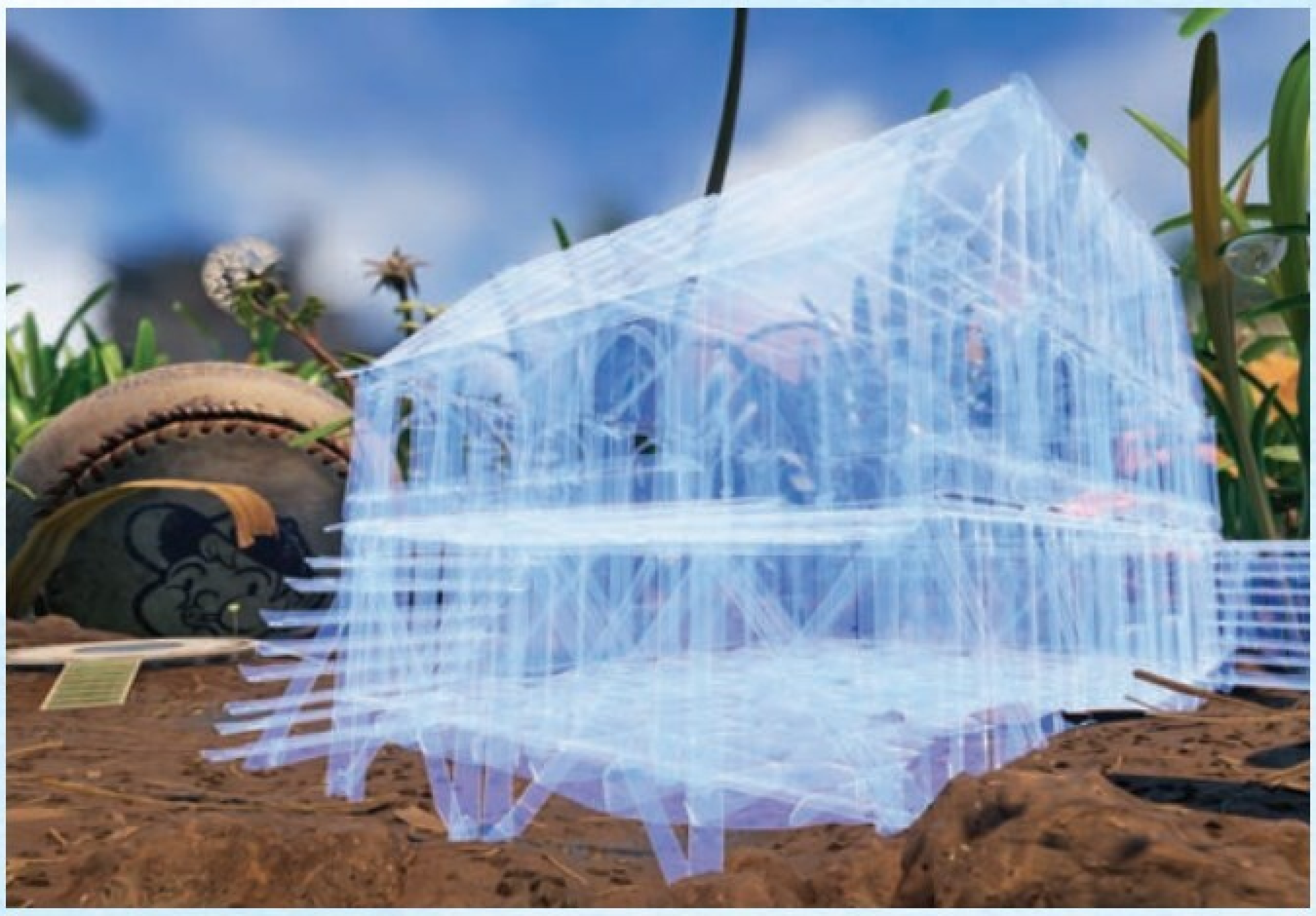
THE NEXT-GEN QUESTION

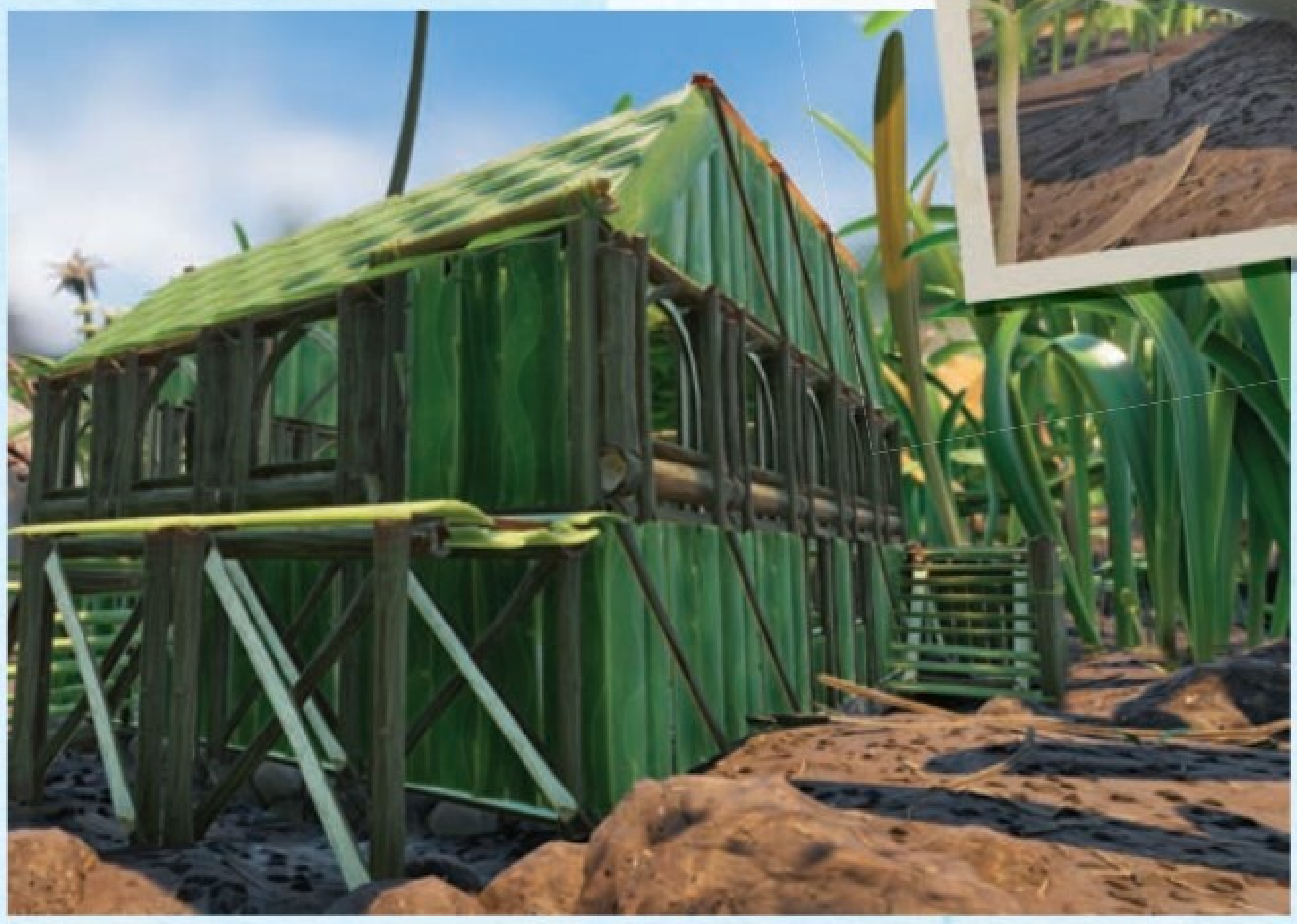
I played the PC version of Grounded, but it's also being developed for Xbox One consoles. With the Xbox Series X looming on the horizon, I was curious to learn what, if any, improvements players might experience on this new hardware. Game director Adam Brennecke didn't have a lot to share on that subject, saying that the Xbox One S and One X were the current focus of their console development. "The PC build definitely has a little more bells and whistles just because we want to take advantage of the hardware, but we're doing our best to make it run really well on the S and the X, and it looks pretty identical, which is amazing, and we're happy with that."

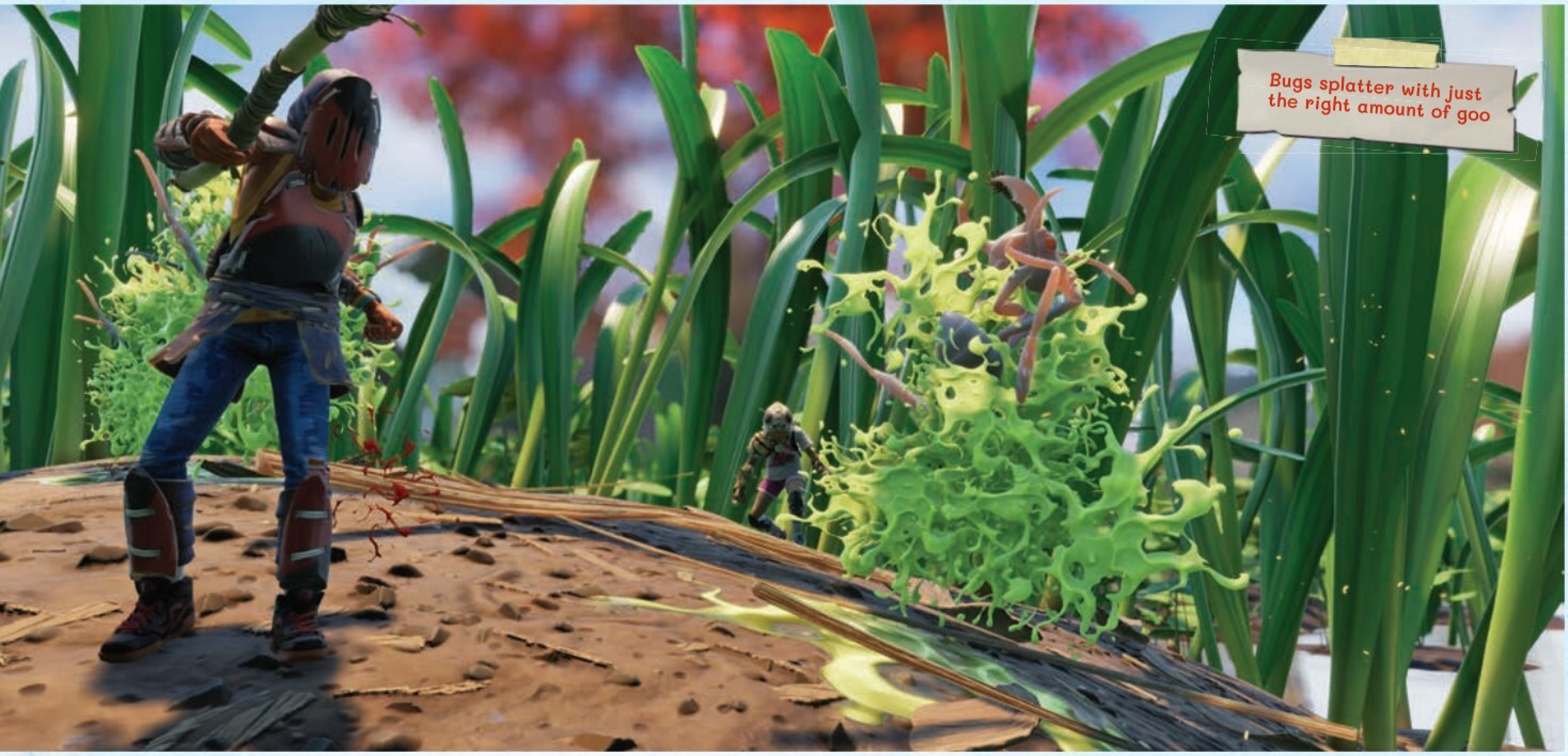




Fun fact: The character on this baseball is a caricature of Obsidian studio head Feargus Urquhart







Bugs splatter with just the right amount of goo

SOCIAL DISTANCING CREEPS IN

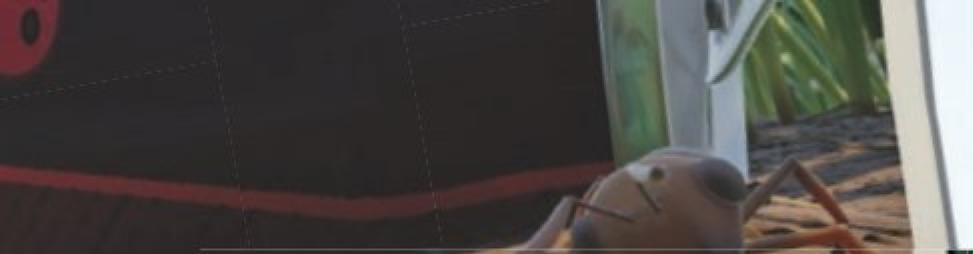
This is not normal. I'm talking to Brennecke about Grounded after the demo. He's in California and I'm in Minnesota. Ordinarily, we'd talk in person, probably in one of Obsidian's conference rooms. But, as everyone knows by now, life in general has been far from ordinary for a while now. Our conversations have been great, and the general awkwardness that comes with teleconferencing has long faded as I've gotten to know the team a little bit, albeit remotely. But it's still kind of weird.

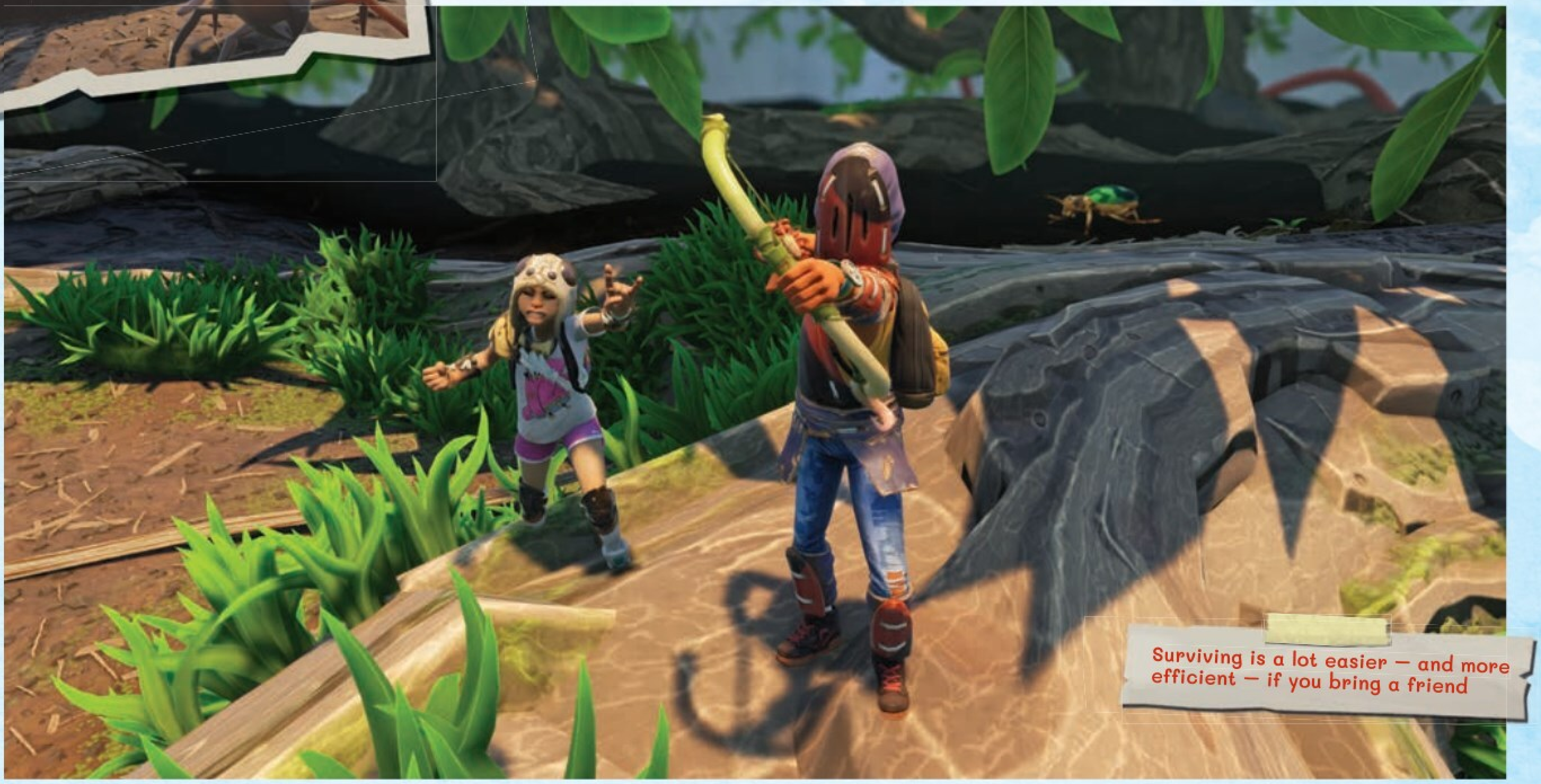
Usually, we travel to game studios for our cover stories. It's one of my favorite things about working here. I love meeting the people who make games, and I'm consistently humbled and grateful for how willing they are to share stories about their work – and how generous they are with their precious time. That kind of traditional cover-story trip simply wasn't possible this month, following the global COVID-19 pandemic. Looking ahead, we're not sure when we'll get back to that familiar routine. Heck, this entire issue was written, laid out, proofed, and published remotely, with a staff of editors and designers who are all working from home.

Our situation is hardly unique. Obsidian has shifted Grounded's development to a similar work-from-home setup. Brennecke is quick to point out that it's an arrangement that indie studios have been doing for a long time, but that it's been a departure from how Obsidian traditionally operates. I wanted to talk to the team about this adjustment and learn how it's affected the game's development, and we set aside a little time to do just that.

First, there's the issue of Grounded's release. The game is going into early access and Game Preview on July 28, and the team feels confident about hitting that mark. "We feel pretty comfortable about that date, even with the complications," Brennecke says. "I think we're in a pretty good spot. From now until then I think we have enough room to really polish it up. A lot of stuff gets done within the last few months of a project, so I think we'll be pretty darn good for launch."

Brennecke says Obsidian's IT department really stepped up in ensuring that the team





Surviving is a lot easier — and more efficient — if you bring a friend

could work remotely. “Making games is quite a bit different from what most people do for work from home, just because we have so much data that we have to transfer back and forth. Our projects are huge, with tons of data, audio, and textures, so making sure our networks can hold up with the terabytes of data being transferred back and forth between everyone. Microsoft was able to give us help in that regard, too, so they provided us with some hardware that let us get better performance out of our network.”

“I was actually blown away with how efficient they were in getting everyone up and running,” Aruga says. “Our team by the second day was almost fully operational again. Huge props to the IT team.”

The actual work doesn’t seem to have changed all that much, even if the staff can’t work in the same office space. “Doing 3D art is pretty similar whether I’m doing it at my desk in the office or if I’m doing it at my desk at home,” Dunny says. “For me, there’s been almost no change in my moment-to-moment workflow, except for the fact that now I listen to music on speakers.”

That’s not to say that it’s not without its complications. “I think the big thing that’s going to be a challenge is VO recording,” Brennecke says. “Typically, you go to the studio and do your VO recording, but now thankfully our actors and actresses are able to do that from home. We hope. But there are some complications with that, in making sure they have a good setup at home. We’re trying to audition for some of our other cast, so even doing auditions is a little difficult of a process, too. We’re using teams and Skype to make sure that everyone who needs to be is there.”

Grounded is being built by a small, close-knit team, and it’s clear that some of the social interactions they’re accustomed to have changed. “On our team, a lot of the ideas that went into the game came about from that random banter that happened around,” Aruga says. “When you look at the day-to-day beats, they’re pretty much the same. Thankfully, the nature of our job is more conducive to this kind of environment, but it’s everything in between the lines that’s kind of different. A conversation you might have overheard in the hallway is now compartmentalized, so there’s no information bleed over, which is the biggest difference I’ve been noticing.”

On a lighter note, both Atadero and Dunny said that one of the perks of this new reality is that, without a commute, they don’t have to wake up quite as early now. “If you had a bad night’s sleep, you can wake up five minutes before your work time and walk over to the chair,” Atadero says. “I’m on time!”

The overall mood seems to be positive. It may not be an ideal situation, but the team is making the most of it. In fact, Brennecke envisions a future in which, after things return to normal, people may have more flexibility when it comes to working from home, now that everyone has a better understanding of what it takes.

“I’m just really appreciative that I have a job that allows me to do this,” Aruga says. “I have so many friends around me that are just out of work now. I have a waitress friend, and she can’t work – I just feel super fortunate and appreciative of people in the medical profession and even grocery store workers; every time I go there, I’m like, ‘You’re a hero.’” ◆

For more information and exclusive features on Grounded, visit www.gameinformer.com/grounded

FUTURE PRO

60 GAMES WE CAN'T WAIT TO PLAY

A

As games roll out month-to-month, it is easy to lose sight of the big picture, and the incredible array of exciting projects on the horizon. We looked at hundreds of announced games, and narrowed that list down to several dozen our staff is especially excited to see brought to life. From impending blockbusters like The Last of Us Part II to distant promises like The Elder Scrolls VI, along with this month's cover story on Grounded, these games are set to shape the hobby over the coming years, closing out the current hardware generation and ushering in the next. From triple-A juggernauts to indie darlings, look ahead with us at the possibilities, and why these games have us eager for the future.

SPECTS

THE ELDER SCROLLS VI

PLATFORM: TBA
RELEASE: TBA

After a gorgeous teaser at E3 2018, we've had only rumors about the next installment of the celebrated series. Skyrim remains one of the most beloved RPGs in history. A new entry that leverages next-gen rendering, removes load screens, and capitalizes on a decade of design could make this the defining RPG for a new generation. I'm especially curious to know the locale within the vast Elder Scrolls world of Nirn – whether we'll explore the boundless deserts of Hammerfell, or even finally cross the oceans to the mysterious lands of the Akavir continent – it's an excellent bet we'll finally depart Skyrim's snowy mountains for a new fantasy landscape. » **MATT MILLER**

BALDUR'S GATE III

PLATFORM: PC
RELEASE: TBA

If you're a fan of Dungeons & Dragons, the cinematic trailer for Baldur's Gate III should be more than enough to get you excited, as it is filled with mind flayers, magic, red dragons, and airships. But even gamers who've never picked up a 20-sided die have a lot to look forward to in this sequel to one of the most important role-playing games ever made. That's because Larian Studios is at the helm.

Larian took the template of the isometric RPG first popularized by Baldur's Gate and helped redefine it for a new generation with Divinity: Original Sin. If the callouts to D&D lore weren't obvious from the trailer, statements from the developer make it clear how much they revere the fiction and hope to create a worthy successor.

As a longtime fan of the genre, there's no developer I'd rather see tackle this project, and early glimpses of party members and encounter design show incredible promise. » **MATT MILLER**

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD SEQUEL

PLATFORM: SWITCH
RELEASE: TBA

After running down a long list of games coming out over the next 12 months during its E3 2019 Direct presentation, Nintendo ended with a cryptic trailer for a sequel to The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. We don't have much information aside from the fact that the director of the first Breath of the Wild is returning, and that this takes place in the same Hyrule. The trailer shows Link and Zelda exploring a tomb, when they stumble upon what appears to be a resurrection ritual involving a decrepit Ganondorf. We hope to learn more, and get a release date, soon. » **BRIAN SHEA**

BAYONETTA 3

PLATFORM: SWITCH
RELEASE: TBA

If you love stylish actions games like I do, then the Bayonetta series needs no introduction. Created by Devil May Cry mastermind Hideki Kamiya, Bayonetta epitomizes the concept of over-the-top action, with flashy combos, inventive encounters, and precise controls guiding the chaos. Though we've only seen a brief Bayonetta 3 teaser trailer so far, we can safely assume those signature elements will remain intact for this sequel. Beyond that, fans are left with many tantalizing questions. What new weapons will Bayonetta wield? What role will Jeanne play in the story? Can developer Platinum Games clear the high bar it set for itself with the last two entries? Without firm details, we can only speculate for now. » **JOE JUBA**

METROID PRIME 4

PLATFORM: SWITCH
RELEASE: TBA

Metroid Prime is the first-person incarnation of Nintendo's classic sci-fi series, letting players explore sprawling worlds and fight strange creatures from Samus Aran's perspective. Metroid Prime 3 (released on Wii in 2007) was supposedly the final entry in the series – until Nintendo announced Metroid Prime 4 at E3 2017. The project was not initially handled by Retro Studios (the team behind the previous Metroid Prime titles), but after a couple years of silence, Nintendo announced in 2019 that development had restarted with Retro at the helm. Though these complications have resulted in an uncertain release date, I'm glad Nintendo and Retro Studios are taking the time to do Metroid 4 right. » **JOE JUBA**

METROID
PRIME
4

BABYLON'S FALL

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • PC
RELEASE: TBA

Square Enix and Platinum Games' upcoming stylish action title brings bold gameplay and big bosses. In some short gameplay trailers, we've seen the signature Platinum Games focus on blazing fast combat, with swords swinging and characters flying through the air to execute amazing takedowns. Despite being announced years ago, we still haven't seen too much of the game, but we're hoping it makes its way to the 2020 slate of titles so we can get airborne with an impressive array of strikes, slashes, and soaring. » **DANIEL TACK**

HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG

PLATFORM: SWITCH • PC • LINUX • MAC
RELEASE: TBA

Players of the original Hollow Knight hardly need convincing about why a follow-up is worth getting stoked about. The original massive game combined fast-paced 2D action, Metroid-style exploration, and a sweeping orchestral score, all set within a gorgeous magical world of fantasy bug empires, backed up by surprisingly deep world-building.

It only took a few minutes of playing the Switch build at last year's E3 to convince me that Silksong is on track as a worthy follow-up. Controls are tight, the new land is sumptuous, and the inimitable style is in place, even with a new protagonist leading the show.

That new hero is Hornet, the acrobatic silk-and-needle wielding princess who played an important role in the previous game. She must now contend with over 150 new foes in an entirely new and vast explorable map, as she gradually works her way toward a looming citadel at the height of the kingdom. » **MATT MILLER**

DIABLO IV

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: TBA

Diablo III's satisfying combat and steady drip-feed of new loot has secured it a slot among my desert-island picks; it's become a relaxing grind, which is probably not what Blizzard was initially aiming for. Diablo IV's recalibrated approach to gearing up is what has me interested in the sequel.

As fun as it is, the number of viable end-game builds for each class is relatively limited. Diablo IV's creators are designing the gear game around experimentation, flexibility, and user preference. I'm looking forward to not only hearing the dopamine-releasing chimes of legendary drops, but also the long-lost sensation of not knowing exactly what I'm in for when I pick up the next piece of loot. » **JEFF CORK**

CYBERPUNK 2077

PLATFORM: XBOX SERIES X • PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 17 (PS4, XBOX ONE, PC), TBA (XBOX SERIES X)

Cyberpunk 2077 has been at the top of our most anticipated games for years now, and for good reason. The Witcher 3 raised the bar for open-world RPGs, and CD Projekt Red wants to push things even further with Cyberpunk, creating six regions, providing tons of customization, and having choice permeate the experience.

You play as V, a customizable mercenary with a thirst for danger, who is about to land their first big contract. As expected, you decide how V sustains their freedom and how he or she impacts the world. CD Projekt is upping the choices available at every turn. When completing missions, you can discover hidden routes and hackable doors, or get in the action, where you can use enemies as meatshields or turn turrets against them. Even how you build your character has an extra layer; you aren't confined to one class or playstyle and can pull from multiple skill trees. CD Projekt Red encourages experimentation; after all, it is how you create cool versions of V, such as building a cyber ninja.

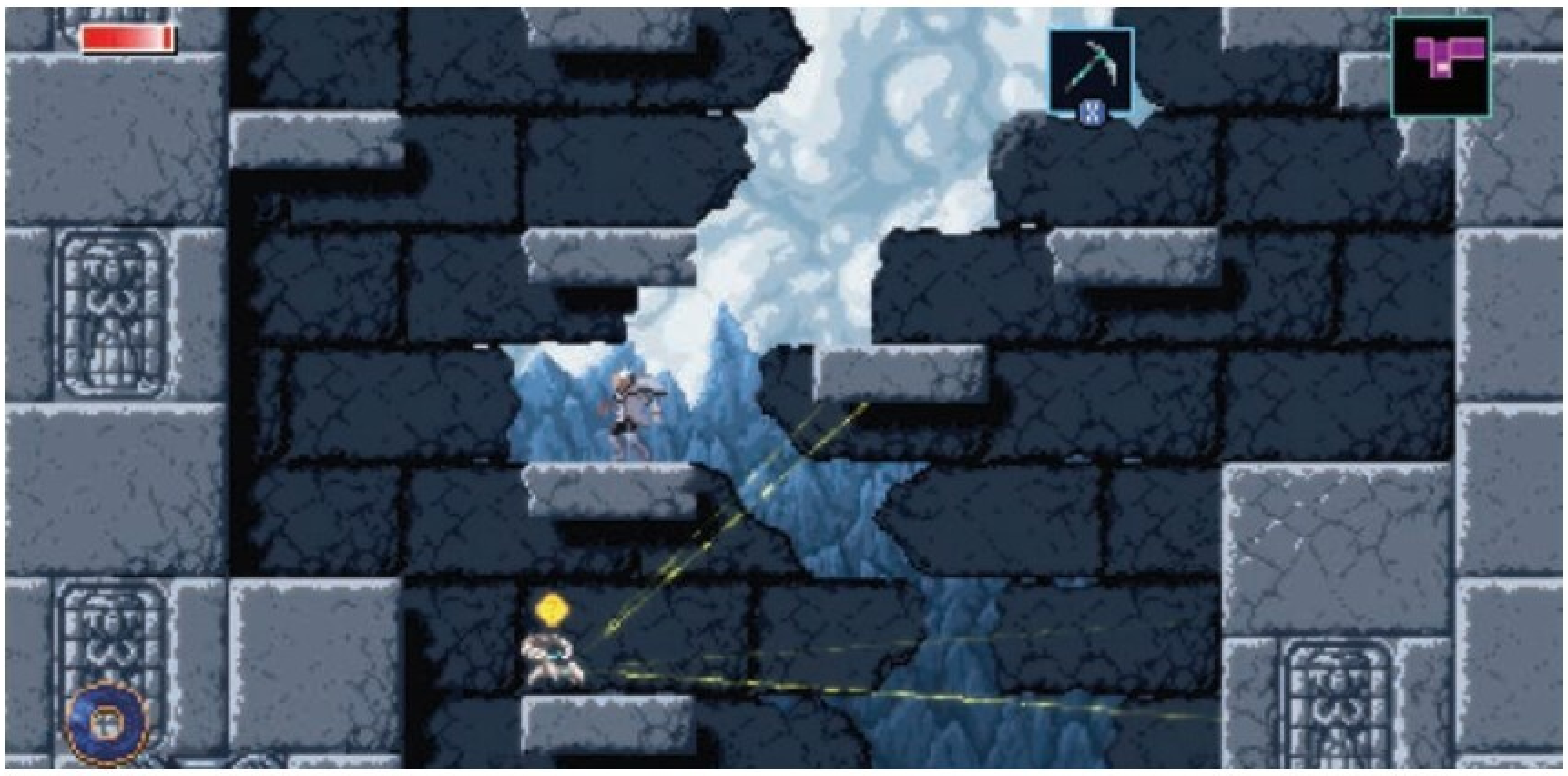
The world is full of its own mysteries beyond taking down corrupt megacorporations, even taking you to cyberspace. And if that's not enough, Keanu Reeves is at your side. » **KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

AXIOM VERGE 2

PLATFORM: SWITCH
RELEASE: FALL

The gaming landscape has no shortage of retro-inspired titles, but few mix nostalgia and innovation as deftly as Axiom Verge. It combined the exploration of Metroid with the crazy weaponry of Contra, all while implementing clever world-building and meta-puzzles in a way that made the experience feel cutting-edge. The original was my personal favorite game of 2015, so I was elated when Axiom Verge 2 was announced in 2019.

The term "sequel" isn't quite accurate for this follow-up, since it somehow covers events that occur both before and after the original. Axiom Verge 2's hero, Indra, has a new arsenal of weapons and abilities to use as she explores an alternate Earth, including an improved drone and the power to hack enemies. The game's lone developer, Tom Happ, has also teased a major feature that won't be revealed until you play the game. Like many players, I enjoy the unexpected twists and secret upgrades in games like this, so I find the mystery surrounding Axiom Verge 2 far more compelling than frustrating. » **JOE JUBA**



DEATHLOOP

PLATFORM: TBA
RELEASE: TBA

Announced at Bethesda's E3 2019 press conference, Deathloop immediately caught our eyes with a stylish debut trailer showing an intense game of cat and mouse. From Dishonored developer Arkane Studio, Deathloop drops players on an anarchistic island called Blackreef for an endless battle between assassins. With time-loop mechanics, myriad ways to approach every situation, and targets to hunt down throughout the island, we can't wait to learn more about this promising first-person action title. If Arkane's work on the Dishonored franchise is any indication, Deathloop will be well worth the wait. » **BRIAN SHEA**

GHOSTWIRE: TOKYO

PLATFORM: TBA
RELEASE: TBA

Tango Gameworks, founded by Resident Evil mastermind Shinji Mikami, made a name for itself with The Evil Within series. Now the studio is ready for a change of scenery. Last E3, the reveal of its new IP, GhostWire Tokyo, made an impression, with a cinematic trailer showing creepy paranormal entities and people vanishing from crowded Tokyo streets. While details are extremely light (we don't even know platforms), Mikami and his studio have already proven their ability to create eerie atmospheres and get inside our heads. The near-future Tokyo setting is an interesting backdrop that adds a real-world tinge to this supernatural tale.
» **KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

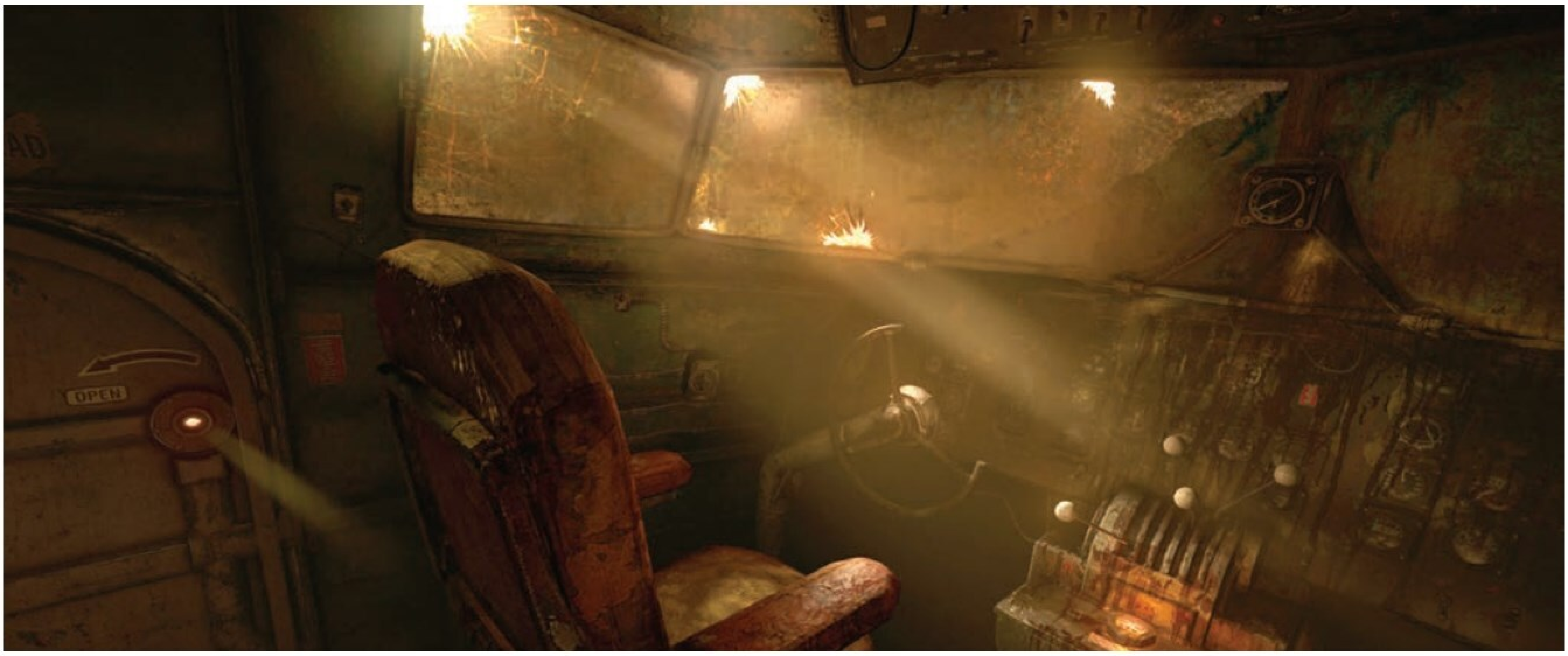
BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2

PLATFORM: TBA
RELEASE: TBA

The ambitious planet-hoping adventure that awaits us in Beyond Good & Evil 2 sounds extraordinary, blending worlds and characters created by developer Ubisoft Montpellier with fan-made content, some of which is curated by partner Hit Record. But seeing is believing, and I haven't seen enough of this game to truly grasp what it will be.

Designed as a prequel to the cult classic, players create their own identity in a science-fiction universe that is heavily inspired by modern cultures around the world. The game is played from the third-person perspective, and offers a surprising amount of movement with a jetpack for city exploration and a starship that can travel to different planets, each filled with sprawling open worlds to lose yourself in.

Beyond Good & Evil 2 was first shown at E3 2017, and has popped up periodically with slivers of new information, but has yet to show us something that feels like a legitimate game. Hopefully that happens soon. » **ANDREW REINER**



AMNESIA: REBIRTH

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • PC
RELEASE: 2020

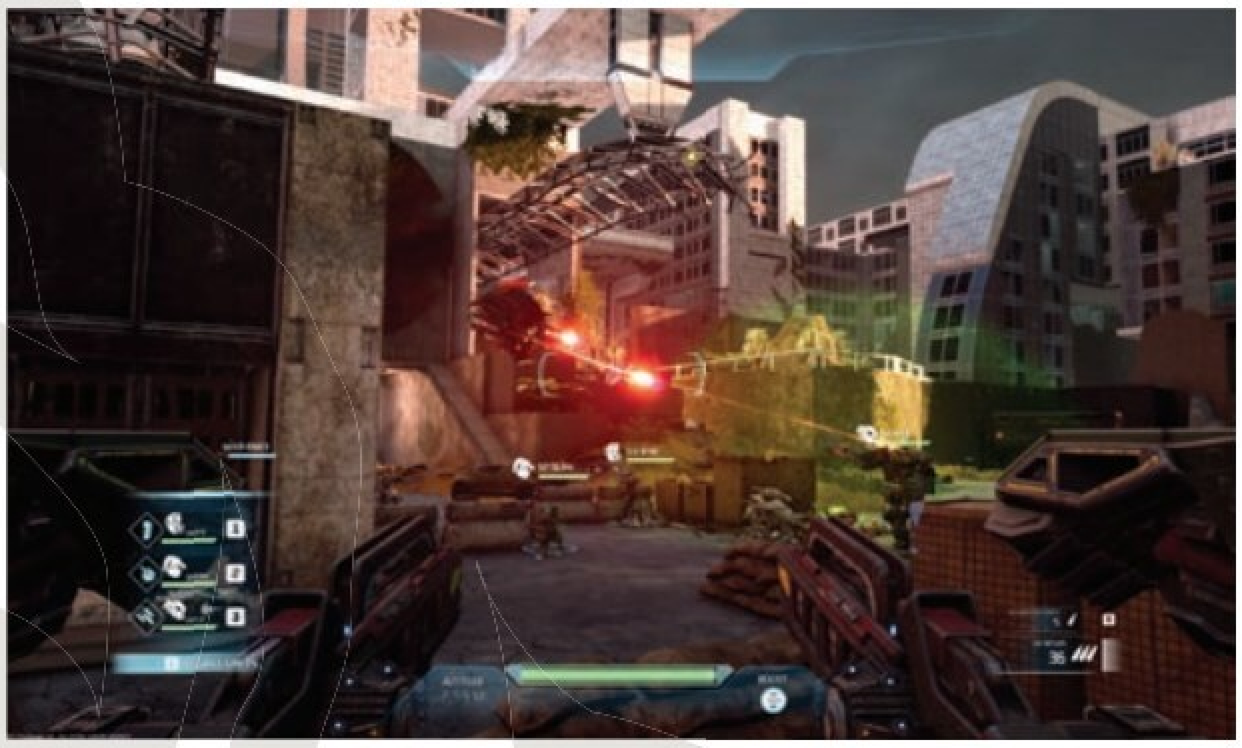
In 2010, Frictional Games released the first-person horror game Amnesia: The Dark Descent, an indie hit that inspired a whole series of combat-free horror games. A decade later, Frictional is returning to this haunting world with Rebirth. After a young woman named Tasi Trianon wakes up in an Algerian desert with no memory of how she got there, she begins a deadly struggle for survival. This desert may be isolated, but it's far from empty, and Tasi will confront several horrors as she endeavors to unravel her haunted pasts. The original Amnesia was incredibly terrifying, so I hope my heart can handle this return. » **BEN REEVES**

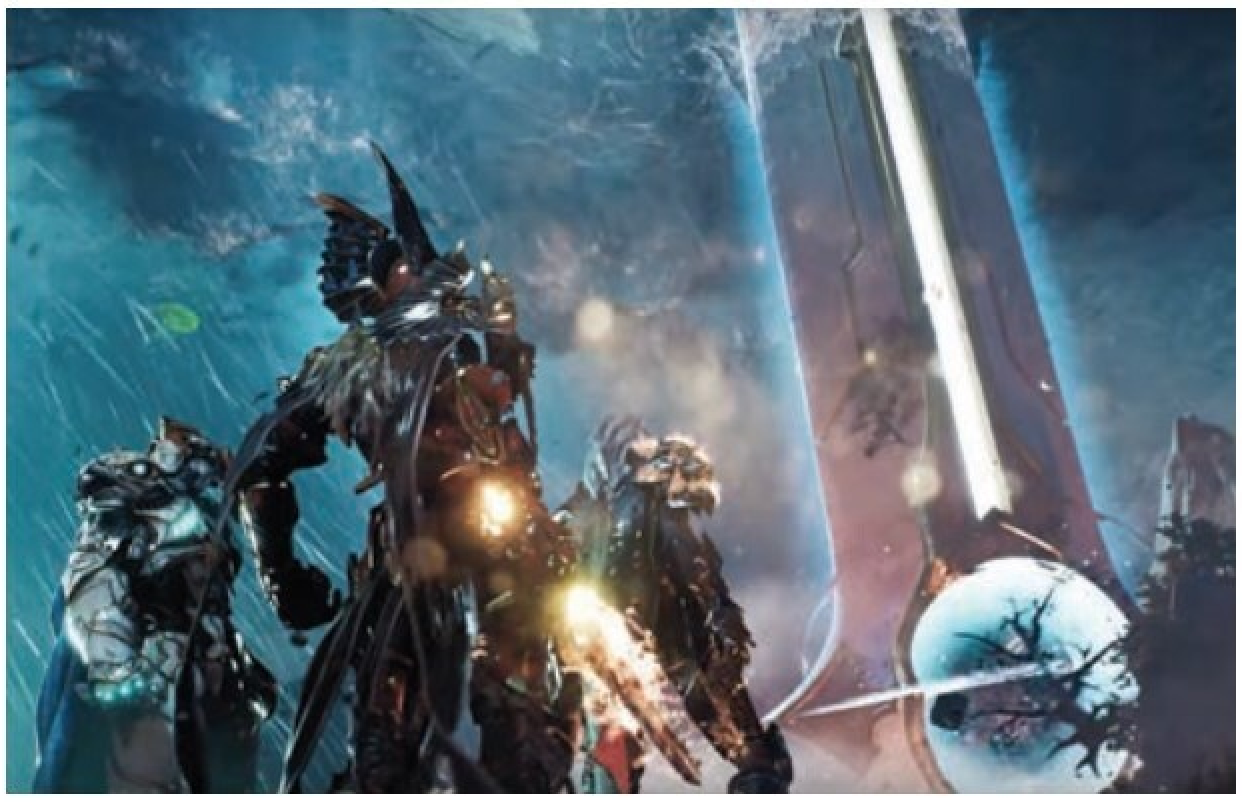
DISINTEGRATION

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: 2020

The Disintegration multiplayer beta from January didn't win me over, but the odd melding of genres did pique my interest for how it could be applied to the single-player campaign. While I haven't got my hands on that side of Disintegration yet, the FPS-style of action with RTS strategies will hopefully prove more interesting than the multiplayer's focus of capturing points.

Both the single and multiplayer modes put players in control of a Gravcycle, a heavily armed vehicle that hovers in the air and gives a good vantage point to issue commands to a squad of four soldiers. Alternating between firing the Gravcycle weapons and telling your troops to move is handled well and challenges you in unconventional ways. The Gravcycle reminds me of Descent, and the strategy has shades of Brothers in Arms. It'll be interesting to see how that mix is used in story-focused and objective-based levels. » **ANDREW REINER**





GODFALL

PLATFORM: PS5 • PC
RELEASE: HOLIDAY

While we have yet to learn many concrete details, Godfall will be one of the first PS5 games available, meaning it will help set a standard for what's possible on new hardware. Godfall is a new cooperative action/RPG that focuses on third-person melee action and can be played with up to three players. Playing off the looter shooter, Godfall is dubbed a "looter slasher," where you are constantly chasing the next best thing, with the goal of attaining legendary weapons and armor. Counterplay Games, which consists of developers who worked on titles like Destiny 2 and Horizon Zero Dawn, took inspiration from Monster Hunter's weapons and combo mechanics, and its powerful beings look right out of a God of War game. The developer promises "high-impact" combat. That's enough to grab our attention. » **KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

ELDEN RING

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: TBA

This upcoming collaboration between Hidetaka Miyazaki (Dark Souls) and George R.R. Martin (*A Song of Ice and Fire*) offers plenty to be excited about, despite the fact that as of this writing details are few and far between. What's thought to be an open-world take on the Dark Souls formula is incredibly intriguing, where players may be able to carve their own path through an atmospheric new world. As with many From Software projects, the internet is abuzz with rumors and speculation, like exploring the massive space on horseback and having no restrictions on where you can go from the beginning of the game. As always, any new From Software project has our interest, and after the dynamite success of Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice, I can't wait to see what challenging journey we go on next. » **DANIEL TACK**

MINECRAFT DUNGEONS

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • SWITCH • PC
RELEASE: MAY 26

Last month, I took a deep dive into Minecraft Dungeons, which got me all the more excited for Mojang's take on the classic action/RPG dungeon crawling pioneered by games like Diablo. My hands-on time with Dungeons convinced me that Mojang's speedy, chaotic combat can hang with the big boys. Dungeon's enemies coordinate their attacks and encourage players to tactically approach each scenario.

Your heroes' gear and weapons dictate your character's abilities and stats, and if you ever grow bored with any single playstyle, all you have to do is change your clothes. Want to be a tanky frontliner, a ranged trickster, a magic powerhouse, or some odd amalgamation of all three? All you have to do is find the right gear. Groups of up to four can easily jump in and out of each other's dungeons, and Minecraft's cutesy, cubey visuals should make this a good time for monster slayers of all ages. » **BEN REEVES**

YAKUZA: LIKE A DRAGON

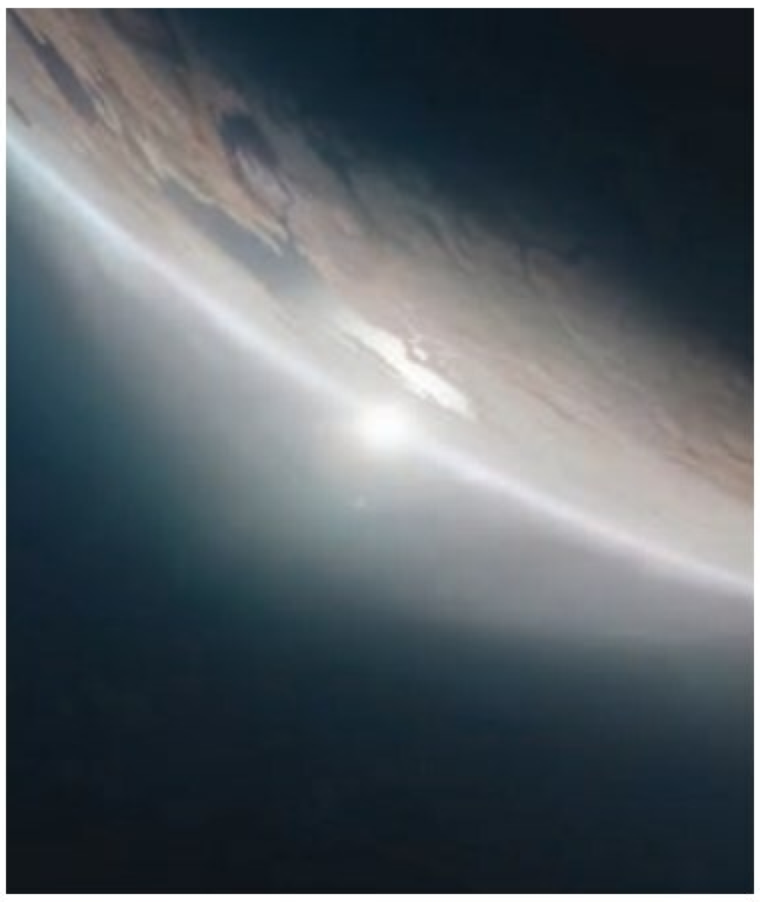
PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4
RELEASE: 2020

Though Kazuma Kiryu's tale concluded with Yakuza 6, that doesn't mean the whole series is over – though it is changing significantly. Yakuza: Like a Dragon features new hero Ichiban Kasuga, and with him comes a completely different combat system. Action-focused fights are replaced by strategic turn-based combat, so battles play out more like a traditional RPG than a brawler – including elaborate summon spells. However, Like a Dragon still has stylish attacks, goofy-but-endearing side quests, and complicated political maneuvering within the world of organized crime. It looks like something familiar mixed with something fresh, and could draw in new players and longtime fans alike. » **JOE JUBA**

STARFIELD

PLATFORM: TBA
RELEASE: TBA

Bethesda Game Studios announced Starfield and The Elder Scrolls VI on the same day at E3 2018, stating both would be single-player RPGs. Bethesda Game Studios calls Starfield a "space epic," and it's the studio's first new franchise in 27 years. No other details are known at this point, other than director Todd Howard saying traversing the cosmos is dangerous, much like flying in the 1940s. » **ANDREW REINER**



HALO INFINITE

PLATFORM: XBOX SERIES X • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: HOLIDAY

When it comes to first-party Microsoft titles, nothing is bigger than Halo. With Halo Infinite, Microsoft and developer 343 Industries hope to showcase the power of its upcoming Series X, which should launch beside the next entry in the flagship franchise. After the long break since Halo 5: Guardians, I'm interested to see what form Halo Infinite takes. Trailers showed plenty of looks at Master Chief preparing to return to action, as well as the impressive engine Halo Infinite is running on, but we still hope to learn more about it in the near future. » **BRIAN SHEA**

GODS AND MONSTERS

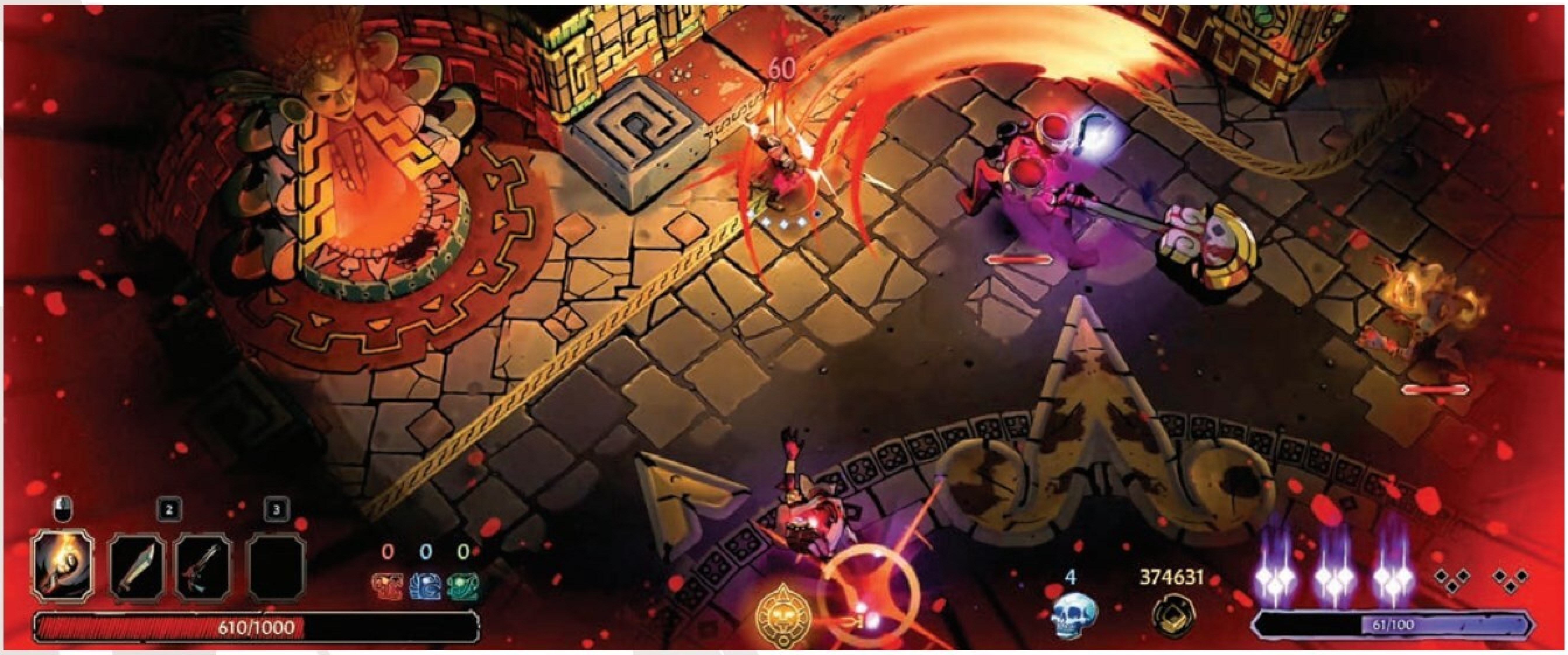
PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE SWITCH • STADIA • PC
RELEASE: 2020

The creators behind Assassin's Creed Odyssey are hard at work on this stunning, mythological quest about an ancient hero's journey to save the Greek gods from a deadly monster called Typhon. Not much has been revealed about Gods and Monsters, but one look at this vibrant open world during E3 2019 was all it took to catch my interest. » **BEN REEVES**

CURSE OF THE DEAD GODS

PLATFORM: PC
RELEASE: TBA

One of the most recent entries to the growing catalog of early access roguelites, Curse of the Dead Gods captured my attention with its tense combat, ominous tone, and rewarding replayability. Players must infiltrate an ancient lost temple, gathering weapons and relics in the vain hope of countering the increasingly crushing effects of an ever-growing curse. I love the sense of desperation, which echoes games like Darkest Dungeon, but here the growing dread comes as you wander a darkened isometric dungeon in fierce and fast-paced throwdowns. Curse of the Dead Gods grows with each update, but this foreboding ruin is already worth exploring. » **MATT MILLER**



DYING LIGHT 2

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: TBA

The follow up to Techland's 2015 hit, Dying Light 2 hopes to up the ante for the post-apocalyptic zombie franchise in every way imaginable. The first Dying Light had very black or white choices, but in the end, the story played out in ignorance of the choices made by players. In Dying Light 2, Techland is working with renowned writer Chris Avellone to craft a more intricate script that adapts to player choices at every turn. These narrative improvements stack on top of design, gameplay, and graphical leaps that make Dying Light 2 look like a true evolution of the already-successful formula. » **BRIAN SHEA**

ODDWORLD SOULSTORM

PLATFORM: PC • CONSOLES (TBA)
RELEASE: 2020

The Oddworld universe took some odd twists and turns over its 20-plus year life. The franchise's original creators are the first to admit that the games gradually veered away from the plan, and they're returning now to rechart the fiction from the start. After a remake of the first game that kept most elements intact, this second and all-new game represents the original vision for how Abe's journey unfolds, now told with the advantage of modern tools of game creation.

After introducing the unlikely hero in New 'n' Tasty, Soulstorm follows Abe as he grows into his Messianic powers. That means he'll lead a huge number of Mudokon slaves to their hoped-for freedom, and his power grows as he gains additional followers. In an early demo I witnessed, that can manifest as hundreds of onscreen characters, and you can bet it's hard to keep them all alive as they repeatedly run headlong into danger. » **MATT MILLER**

PSYCHONAUTS 2

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: 2020

It's been a long road to the sequel of the 2005 cult hit where you used psychic powers to explore people's minds. Psychonauts was considered a commercial failure but often graces sequel wishlists. The story behind Psychonauts 2 shows the power of passion and perseverance, with its dedicated following crowdfunding a portion of the game in 2015.

A lot has happened since then; Double Fine launched a VR Psychonauts adventure in 2017 that set up the sequel, and just last year, Microsoft acquired the developer, which should ease some financial constraints. We haven't heard much about the game, except that the basic core of using cool powers like levitation and telekinesis to reach people's deep-seated issues remains intact. The highly creative Double Fine team crafting one of the most desired sequels for a new generation of gamers certainly has our attention and enthusiasm. » **KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR

PLATFORM: XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: 2020

Flight simulators haven't received a lot of love lately, but Microsoft will give flight sim fans a big hug later this year with the revival of its classic Flight Simulator brand. Using a combination of global satellite data and aerial imagery, Microsoft spared no expense creating a realistic model of our entire planet. The studio says its digital Earth is so accurate that players can follow known roads, rivers, and lakes to find their way home. Simulated atmospherics allow clouds to move realistically around mountains and down valleys, and players will be able to chart their flight plans using real-time weather data.

Naturally, this push for life-like simulation extends into the cockpit where players can jump behind the center stick of a wide variety of aircraft, ranging from giant airbuses to prop planes. Those interested in learning actual piloting skills can use Flight Simulators' interactive checklist feature, which explains every single dial and switch on their plane. If nothing else, Microsoft Flight Simulator looks like an ambitious piece of technology and a balm for grounded travelers. » **BEN REEVES**

SABLE

PLATFORM: XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: 2020

Sable was first introduced at E3 2018, and the colorful world and art style made an immediate impression. The desert environment shown may be sparsely populated, but the world is far from dead. It's filled with intriguing monuments and mysteries that invite exploration.

The titular character is part of a tribe, but she's on her own journey involving finding and using different masks that represent different roles within the world. A story of self-discovery is standard fare, but developer Shedworks wants to bring together exploration, the world's different tribes, and Sable's story in an intriguing way – a compelling task given that the game has no combat. How will it generate tension and stakes without it? In a gameplay sense, I imagine puzzles are involved, although it's unknown right now if that's the case. Regardless, Sable makes her way around the world via her hoverbike, the ability to climb cliff faces, and even by floating through the air encased in a bubble. It sounds like the start of a grand adventure. » **MATTHEW KATO**

NO MORE HEROES 3

PLATFORM: SWITCH
RELEASE: 2020

It took 10 years before we got another numbered entry in the zany No More Heroes series, but Travis Touchdown is back. However, this time he's using his wrestling moves and beam katana to face off against a new type of enemy: aliens masquerading as superheroes. Executive director Goichi Suda called the enemies "Thanos-like," promising everything would be on an "epic scale" when we interviewed him. This is the biggest budget a No More Heroes game has received, promising a greater scope for the open world, complete with plenty of side activities and crazy shenanigans. Suda and the Grasshopper Manufacture team have shown us time and time again that they are anything but ordinary, so seeing just how over-the-top the antics get is sure to be a highlight. Now to get ready to climb the rankings as Travis once more; somebody has to save the world from all these superpowered aliens. » **KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

WASTELAND 3

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: AUGUST 28

A tactical strategy soiree filled with important story choices, Wasteland 3 examines a dark reality where sanity has subsided in the face of a nuclear apocalypse. Players come face-to-face with a psychotic robot Reagan, a druglord Santa Claus, and massive Scorpitrons wandering the Colorado wilderness. Decisions matter, and along the way your group of scrappy survivalist Rangers have to choose which factions to side with – and which ones will become enemies. With open-ended exploration, a wide variety of potential endings await as you go offroad into the fallout-tinged outskirts, cruising in your all-terrain Kodiak vehicle that also functions as a potent combat assistant. Grim humor seeps through the dire narrative, making Wasteland 3 a jarring and gruesome look into a fictitious future. » **DANIEL TACK**

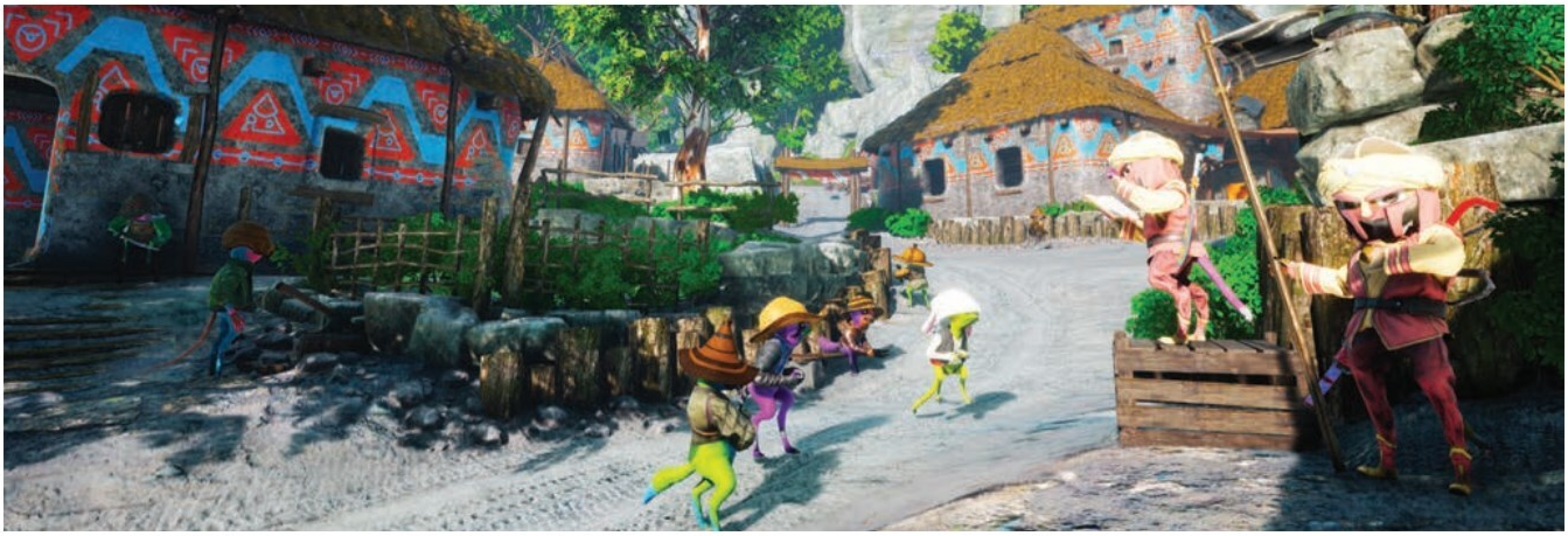
THE LAST OF US PART II

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4
RELEASE: TBD

The Last of Us Part II is at the center of a perfect storm of anticipation. First, it's the follow-up to the game that introduced us to Joel, Ellie, and their grim post-apocalyptic world. Second, it's the latest title from Naughty Dog, a studio with a reputation for well-crafted and highly polished experiences. Finally, The Last of Us Part II is coming at the end of a console cycle, which means it is likely to push technical boundaries and produce astounding results. Looking at the intersection of all these points, it's no wonder that gamers everywhere are looking forward to this Playstation 4 exclusive.

The focus has shifted from Joel to Ellie in this sequel; she is the primary character, though Joel still plays a role in the story. What exactly has happened in the five years since the events of the original isn't completely clear, but I would guess Joel's final words to Ellie during that emotional conclusion will put a strain on their relationship in Part II.

Naughty Dog has been more forthcoming about the gameplay in Part II, emphasizing the need to remain hidden while also staying on the move. You still scavenge resources and weigh the value of components, using them to create healing items or traps that can help you in your encounters with humans and infected alike. This combination of stealth and careful action was successful in the original. We're eager to see all final tweaks and improvements when The Last of Us II finally launches, even if we have to wait a little longer due to the recent delay. » **JOE JUBA**



BIOMUTANT

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: 2020

Experiment 101's Biomutant snared my attention when it was announced at Gamescom 2017 – initially because of its bizarre-sounding genre mashup. A post-apocalyptic, kung-fu fable? Sure, why not. Seeing it in action over the subsequent years has only increased my interest, thanks to gorgeous visuals, a deep focus on customization, and the team's knack for reenergizing familiar gameplay concepts.

The "fable" part refers to the fact that, yes, you make a lot of moral choices throughout the game. Studio head Stefan Ljungqvist says that while these are tracked with the traditional color and score, your overall alignment also affects what he calls your character's "inner dialogue." That's in addition to changing the kinds of psionic powers you're able to wield. After all, this is a game where changing your genetic makeup (and abilities) is part of the core loop. Stuck on an environmental puzzle? The solution could be a quick DNA restructure away. It's a unique take on third-person (or animal) action that I can't wait to get my paws on. » **JEFF CORK**

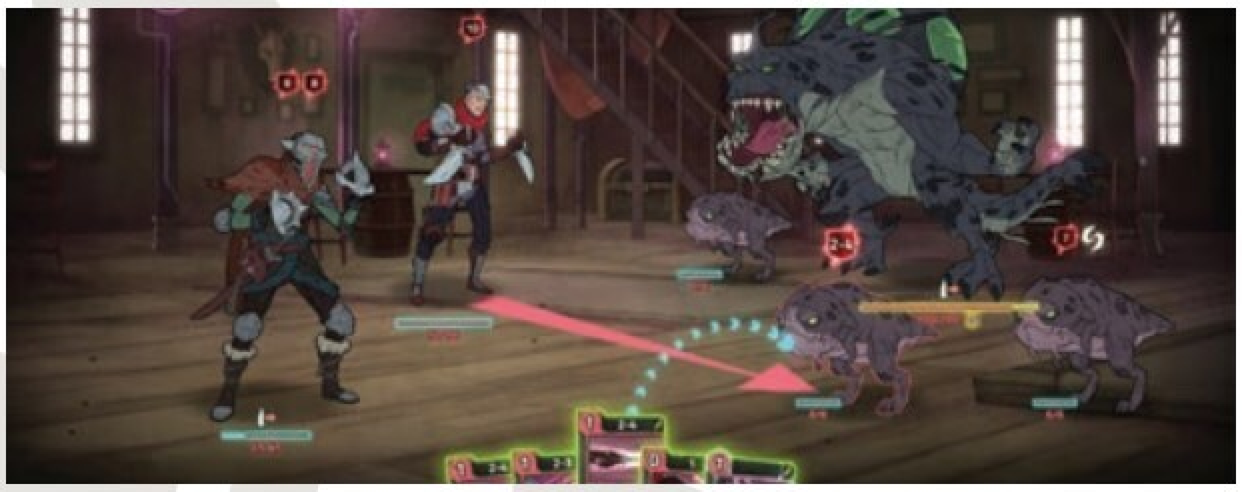
GRIFTLANDS

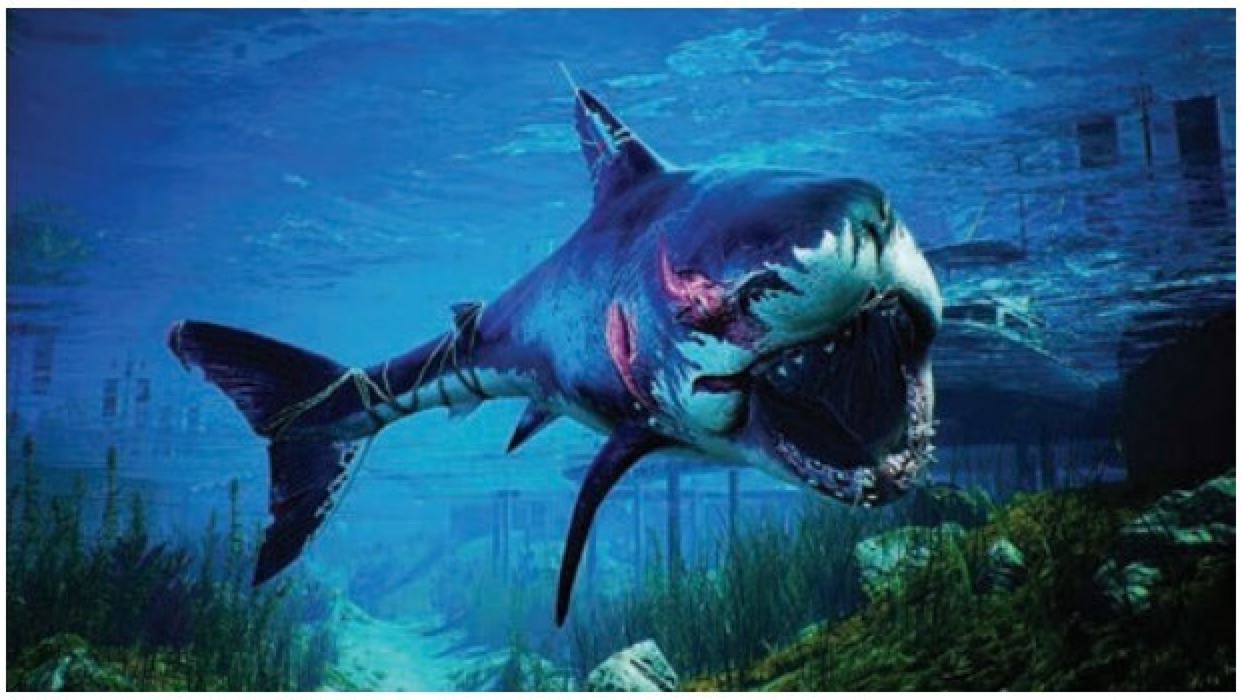
PLATFORM: PC
RELEASE: LATE 2020

In most RPGs, the persuasion skill is just an optional way to sweet talk your way past the guards, but Griftlands (from Klei Entertainment) takes conversations into new directions. It's a fundamental part of your journey as an adventurer, and it's melded with card deck building (sans microtransactions) to make these important verbal interactions more than just a series of text boxes.

The game has separate decks for conversation versus combat, but both resolve themselves in the same manner; cards for offense and defense wear down your opponent's arguments or armor. The roguelike's permadeath gives combat its own edge, including random encounters and bosses at the end of each day's adventure. I particularly like how your choices during your travels, your treatment of NPCs (companions like pets can come to your aid), the outcomes of battles, and where you go throughout the land, affect the building of your deck.

Hopefully there are enough strategic options no matter how it's constructed, what choices you make, or which of the main characters you play as (there are four total). The world of Griftlands is a dangerous place, and the gift of the gab can be just as important as the way of the warrior. » **MATTHEW KATO**





MANEATER

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • SWITCH • PC
RELEASE: MAY 22 (SWITCH TBA)

Playing as a shark may seem like a novelty experience, but developer Tripwire Interactive envisions it as a sprawling story-driven RPG where players guide a young bull shark to adulthood as famed voice actor Chris Parnell narrates the journey. The shark grows by completing missions and developing a hunger for various meats (including humans if you want to be evil), and will eventually move from open ocean to resort beaches, the bayous of the gulf coast, and even a place like SeaWorld. Of the 60 games we rounded up, Maneater is the wildest, strangest, and the one I just have to see to believe.

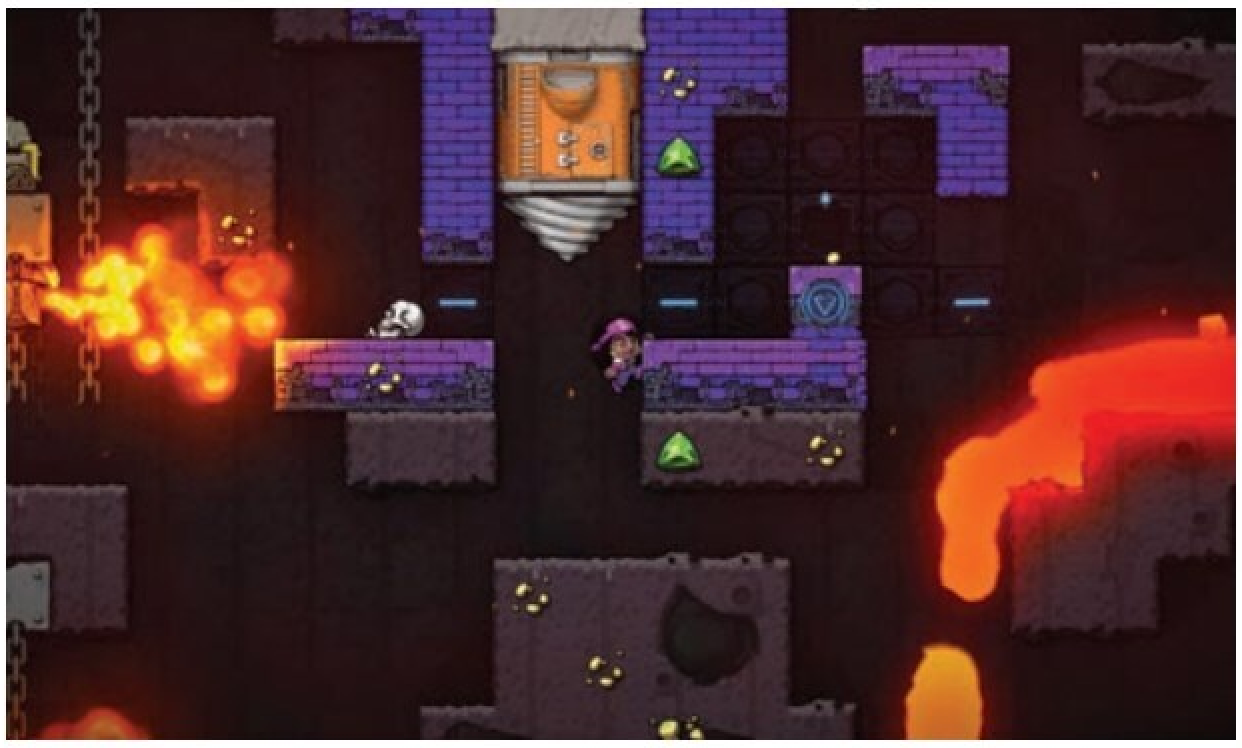
The shark gains new abilities as it grows, like tail strikes and lunges, all with the intent of becoming powerful enough to down Scaly Pete, the human who killed your mother. You need to choose your battles wisely, though, as size matters, and larger creatures can take you out quickly. » **ANDREW REINER**

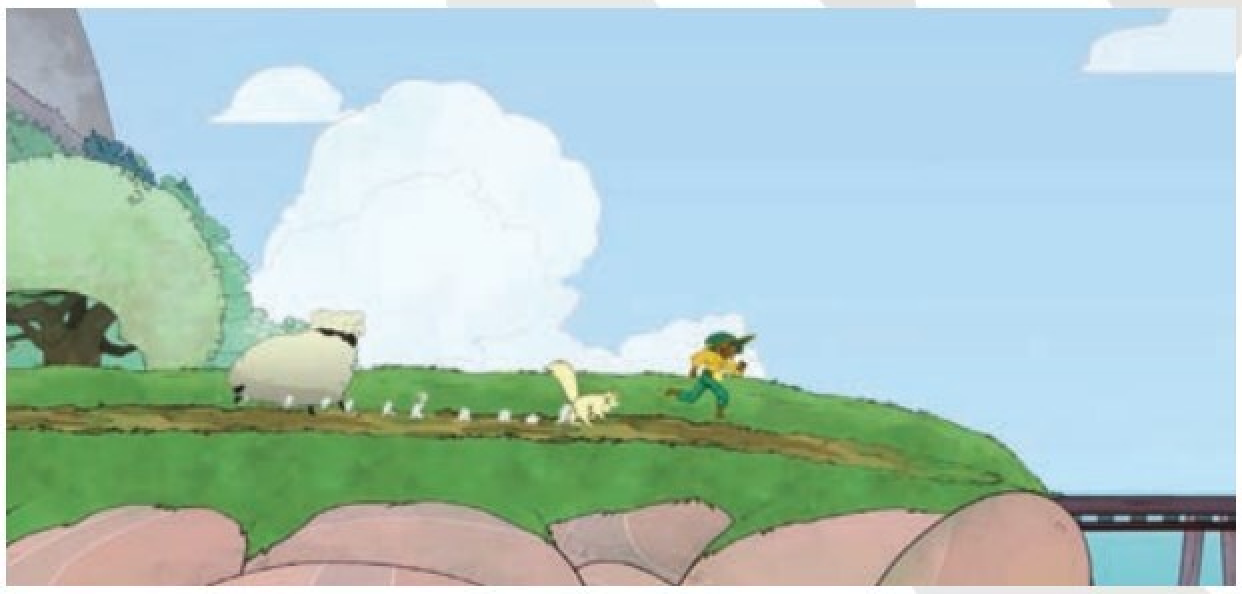
SPELUNKY 2

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • PC
RELEASE: TBA

The original PC freeware version of Spelunky grew into an indie roguelike phenomenon that let players explore a series of randomly generated temples and gather precious gems while avoiding traps and other deadly enemies. It's been a long wait, but Spelunky 2 will let players control one of several heroes, including the daughter of the hero from the first game.

Creator Derek Yu first announced Spelunky 2 in 2017 and has been slow to release new details, but Yu said he hopes each run will feel more unique and that players will have their own personalized adventures. Like the original game, Spelunky 2 features a variety of useful items for purchase, such as bombs, shotguns, and jetpacks. Would-be archeologists can even tackle these trap-filled temples in a new co-op mode. The original Spelunky was incredibly addicting, and I can't imagine the sequel will be any different. » **BEN REEVES**





SPIRITFARER

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • SWITCH • PC
RELEASE: 2020

Developer Thunder Lotus Games describes Spiritfarer as a "cozy management game about dying," which might raise more questions than it answers. After all, death usually doesn't figure prominently into my favorite management sims, but Spiritfarer appears to integrate the theme in an inventive way.

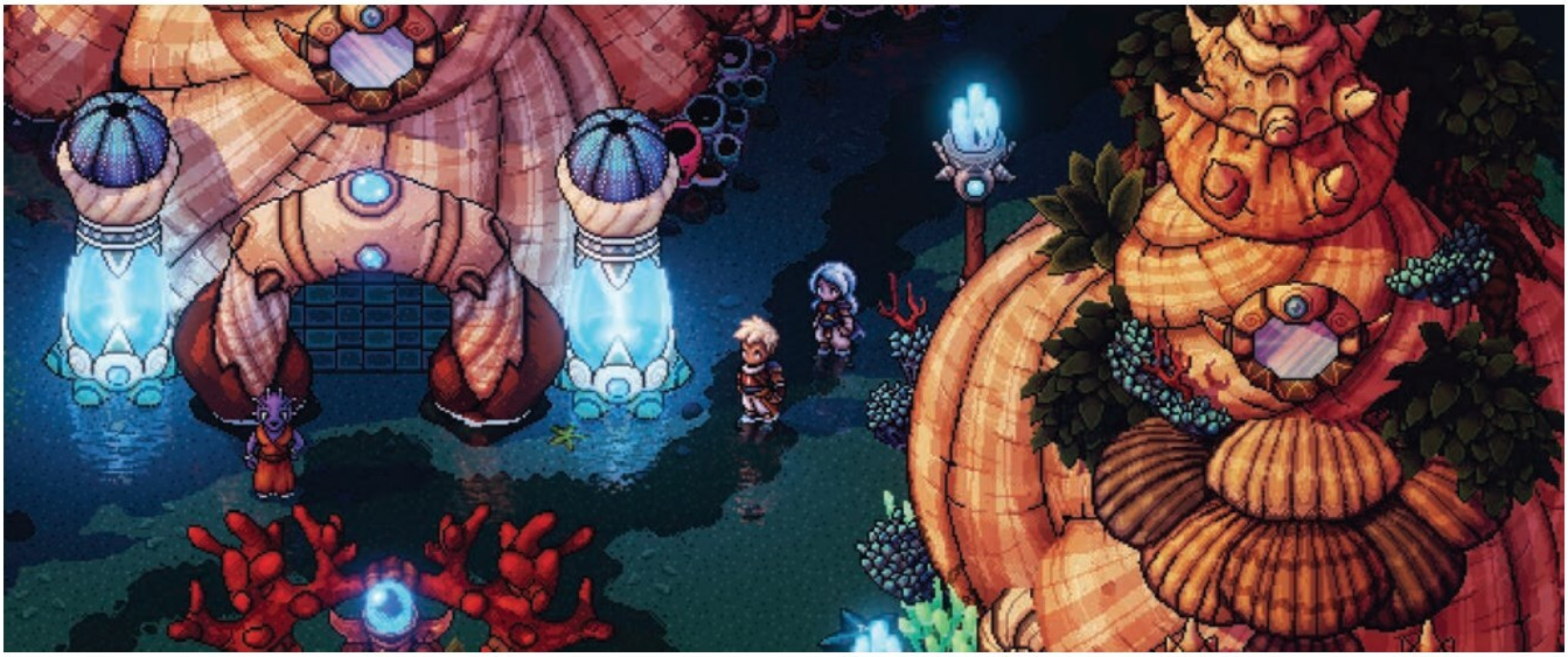
Players control Stella, who ferries the dead from the world of the living to whatever waits beyond. As her spirit passengers board the boat, Stella builds relationships with them through conversation and attending to their requests, like gathering certain items the next time she goes ashore. Items you collect are also useful in other relaxing pursuits, such as fishing, farming, cooking, and crafting.

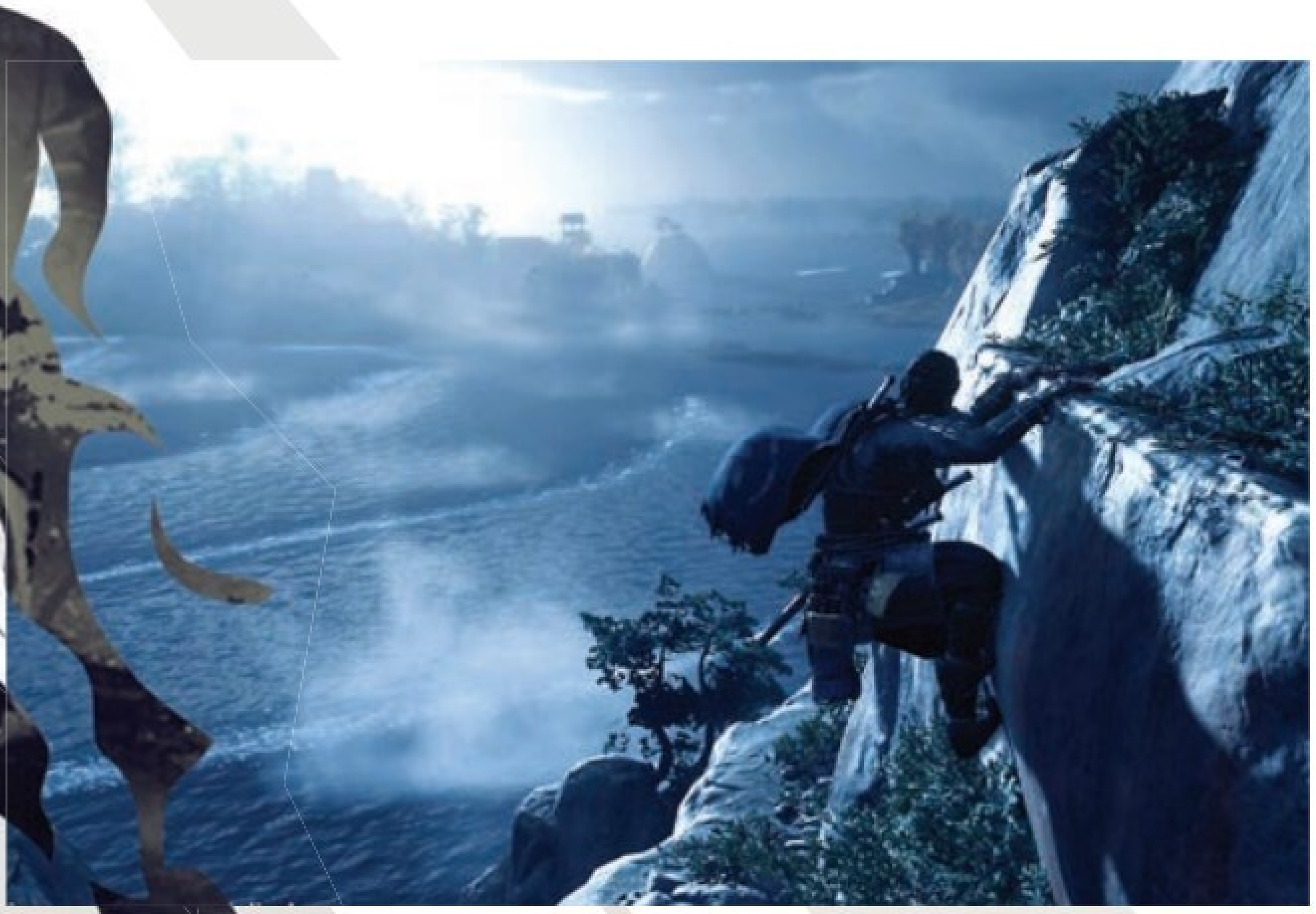
Stella's ship expands as the voyage continues, effectively turning into a seabound village, with the different spirits occupying rooms that reflect their personalities. You must eventually say goodbye to these companions, but I'm intrigued by how that bittersweet element could encourage players to appreciate the limited time they have. » **JOE JUBA**

SEA OF STARS

PLATFORM: PC • CONSOLES TBA
RELEASE: 2022

After releasing the indie darling The Messenger in 2018, developer Sabotage is looking to the future by returning to the past. Sea of Stars is a turn-based RPG that takes place in the same world as The Messenger. However, rather than explaining origin stories for characters, this prequel gives you explanations for the world. Harnessing the power of the sun and moon, you control solstice warriors on a quest to defeat a menacing monster that creates abominations of flesh, bone, and blood. Sea of Stars has clearly resonated with players, as the March Kickstarter campaign blew past its goal in less than 24 hours. » **BRIAN SHEA**





GHOST OF TSUSHIMA

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4
RELEASE: JUNE 26

Fans of space marines don't appreciate how good they have it. While their game options are virtually endless, those of us who love samurai movies have a comparatively meager selection. That could be changing in a few short months, with the release of Sucker Punch's Ghost of Tsushima – and I couldn't be more excited.

The titular Ghost has a host of tricks up his sleeves, incorporating obvious elements like swordplay and archery, as well as sneak attacks, pyrotechnic distractions, and grappling lines that get my Tenchu-loving heart racing. Swordplay looks like a nice mix of attacking and countering, with a brutal lethality that sells the fantasy that, yes, there's a reason your Mongol enemies have grown to fear your name.

Considering that Sucker Punch is a member of Sony Worldwide Studios, it's difficult to imagine that Ghost of Tsushima isn't being developed with the powerful new PlayStation 5 hardware in mind. I've always gravitated toward games with sprawling open worlds, and the possibility of exploring these rich environments without having to suffer through excruciating load times is particularly exciting. » **JEFF CORK**

DEADLY PREMONITION 2: A BLESSING IN DISGUISE

PLATFORM: SWITCH
RELEASE: 2020

The original Deadly Premonition was a detective story full of quirky characters and offbeat charm. Creator Hidetaka "Swery" Suehiro is returning to the universe for this prequel involving a string of murders near New Orleans. Eager fans like me have been waiting a decade to reunite with Francis York Morgan and Zach, so I'm hoping the team can recapture that unique cult-classic appeal. » **JOE JUBA**

BRAVELY DEFAULT II

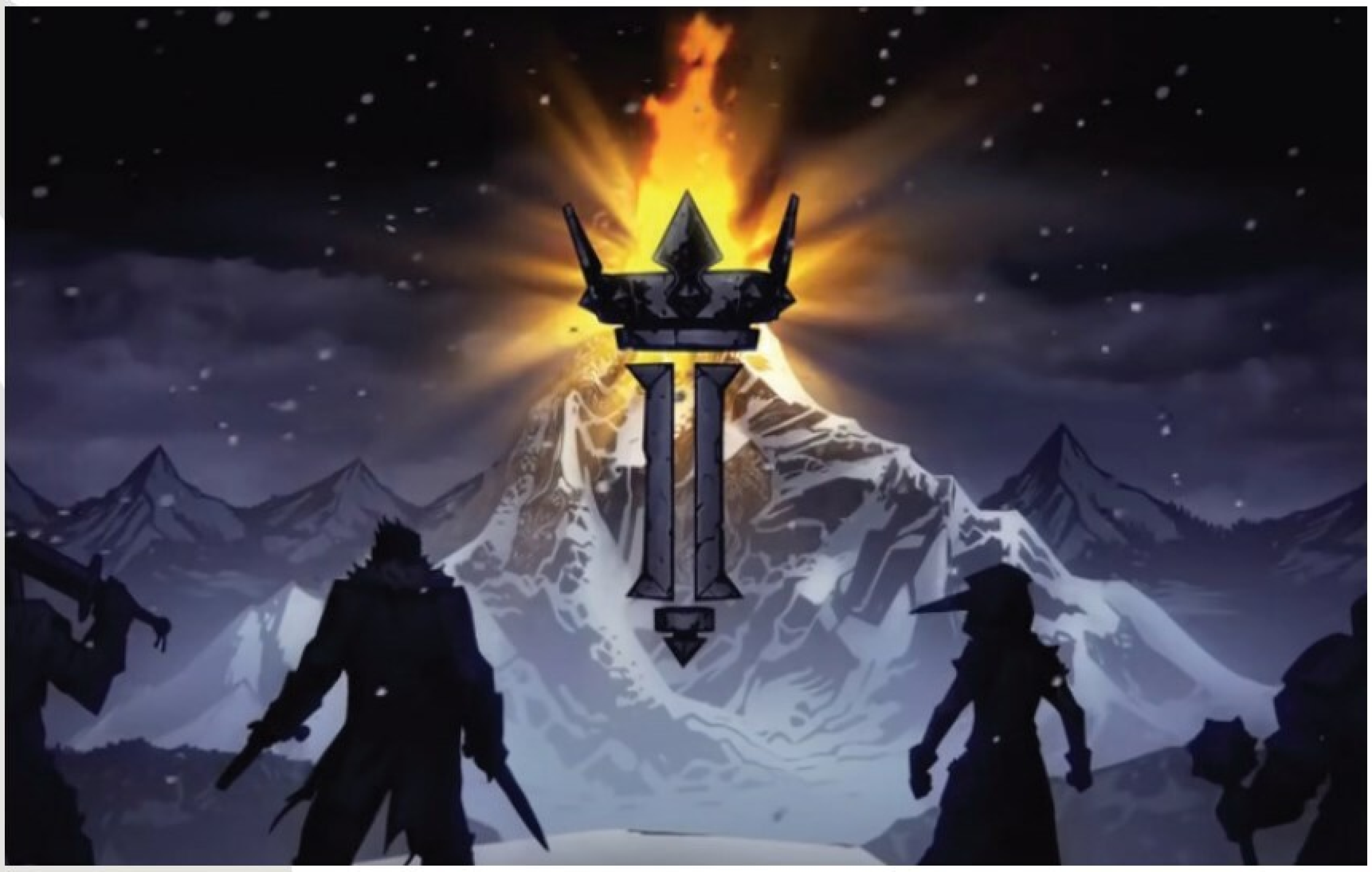
PLATFORM: SWITCH
RELEASE: 2020

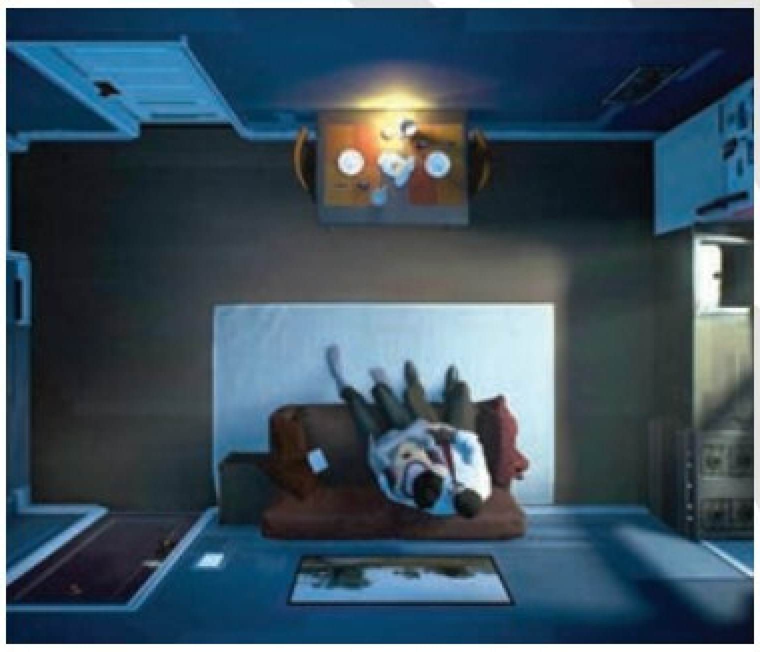
Fans of traditional JRPGs fell in with the Bravely Default series and its direct sequel on 3DS. To make its grand entrance on Switch, Nintendo recently dropped a demo, showcasing the signature turn-based battle system that lets you store turns, and the fun class combinations are still paramount. The 3D visuals have also seen quite the improvement. The same team who worked on prior entries – and more recently Octopath Traveler – is back, so let's see what creative twists they bring to the table on a more powerful platform. » **KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

DARKEST DUNGEON 2

PLATFORM: PC
RELEASE: TBA

Darkest Dungeon gave players a terrifying and tantalizing taste of cosmic horror mixed with roguelike dungeon crawling, as a sprawling Lovecraftian yarn played out amidst countless hero deaths and endless afflictions. Despite that, players found hope in the direst of circumstances to come out of the ordeal as champions. Not much is known about this sequel outside of a brief teaser video, which shows some of our favorite classes from the original poised to set out on a journey through freezing mountains of madness. While I'm not expecting any major mechanical shifts from the original title, Red Hook is set to deliver a deliciously gothic treat when they return to their sanity-sapping series. » **DANIEL TACK**

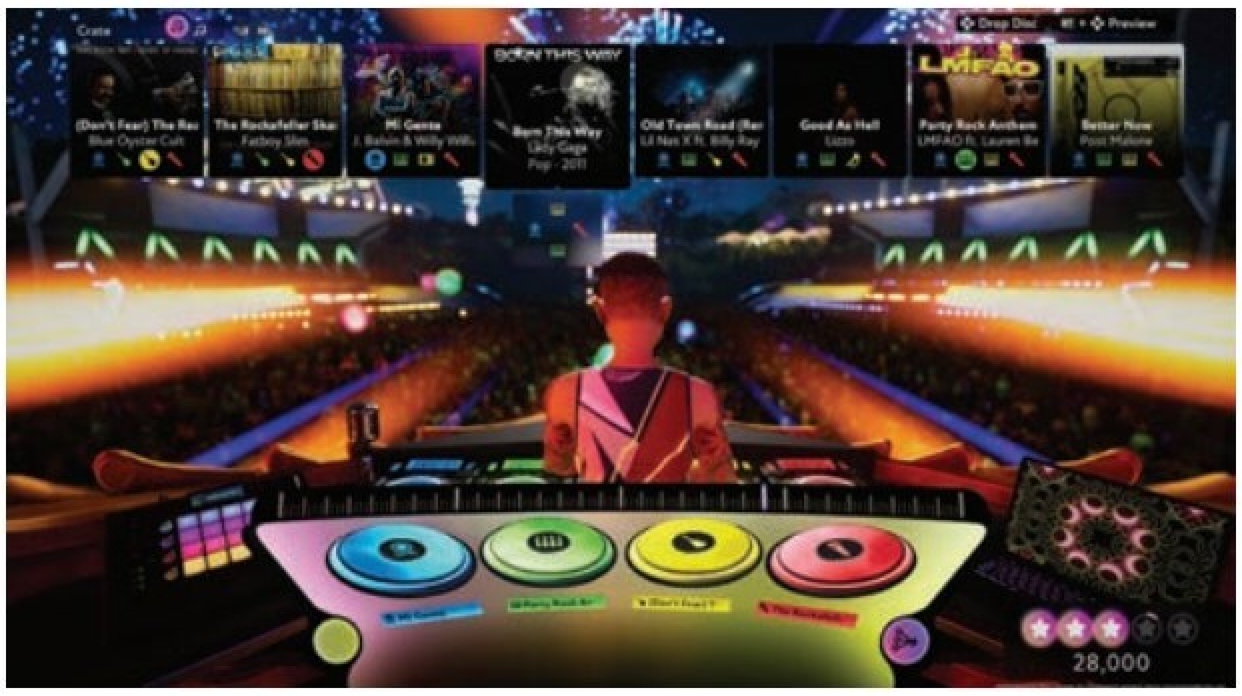




12 MINUTES

PLATFORM: XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: 2020

The cops are about to break down the door into the apartment and beat you and your partner into submission. It's happened before, and it will happen again. How will you handle it next time? This fascinating time-loop plays out in repeated 12-minute chunks, and aims to let you tackle the dilemma any way you can imagine. Do you grab a kitchen knife? Try to talk it out? Each choice brings consequences, and more information for next time. The freedom to do virtually anything (albeit in one small apartment) is a big reason why this is one of the most intriguing narrative projects currently under development. » **MATT MILLER**



FUSER

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • SWITCH • PC
RELEASE: FALL

Harmonix has a long history of innovation in music games, and I'm thrilled with what I've seen of the team's latest project. The veteran developer already did some remarkable work blending separate songs into unified mixes with their tabletop/mobile hybrid, Dropmix, and Fuser capitalizes on that capability with a new release for major consoles and PC.

Players control a DJ as they weave together instrumental and vocal tracks in response to fan requests. Nailing time-sensitive demands with careful timing on the downbeat leads to high scores.

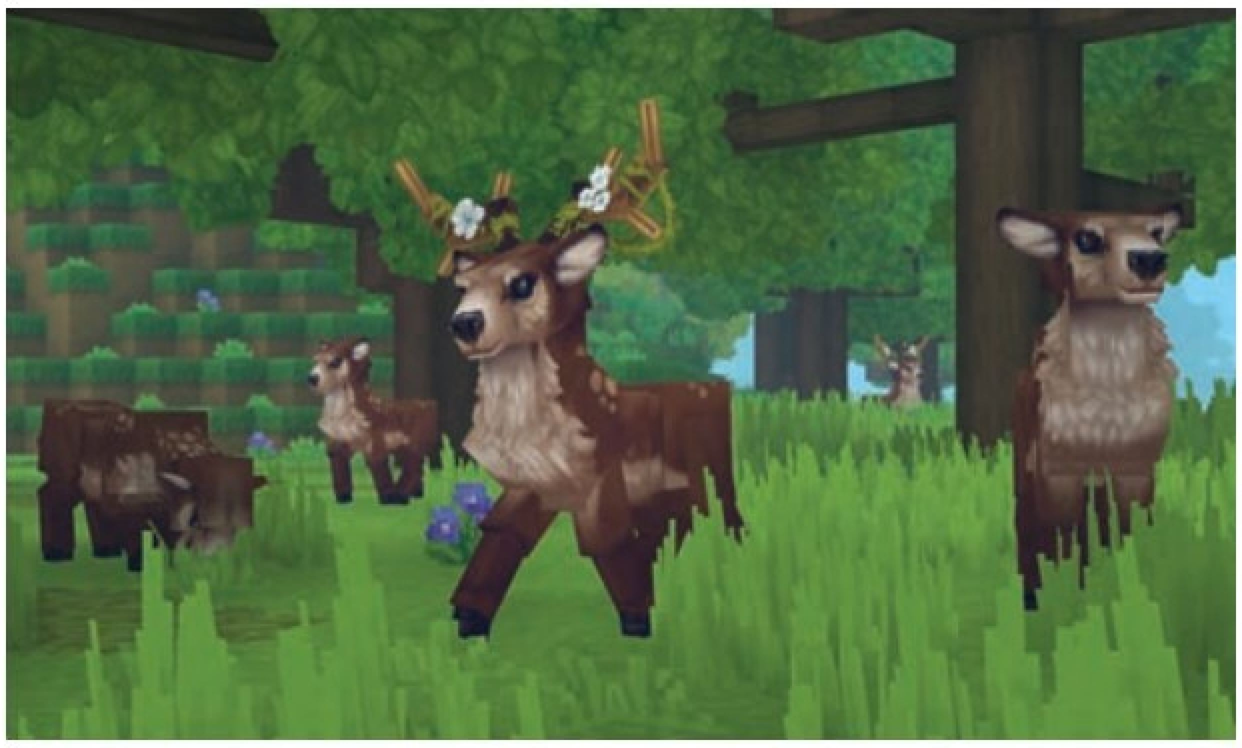
Over 100 songs are promised, but early announced entries show the rich breadth for which Harmonix is known. Whether it's "Regulate" from Warren G & Nate Dogg, "Bad Guy" from Billie Eilish, or "Rock the Casbah" from The Clash, you have plenty of riffs to pick between, but it's the way all of them collide in a unique mix that makes Fuser so gratifying. » **MATT MILLER**

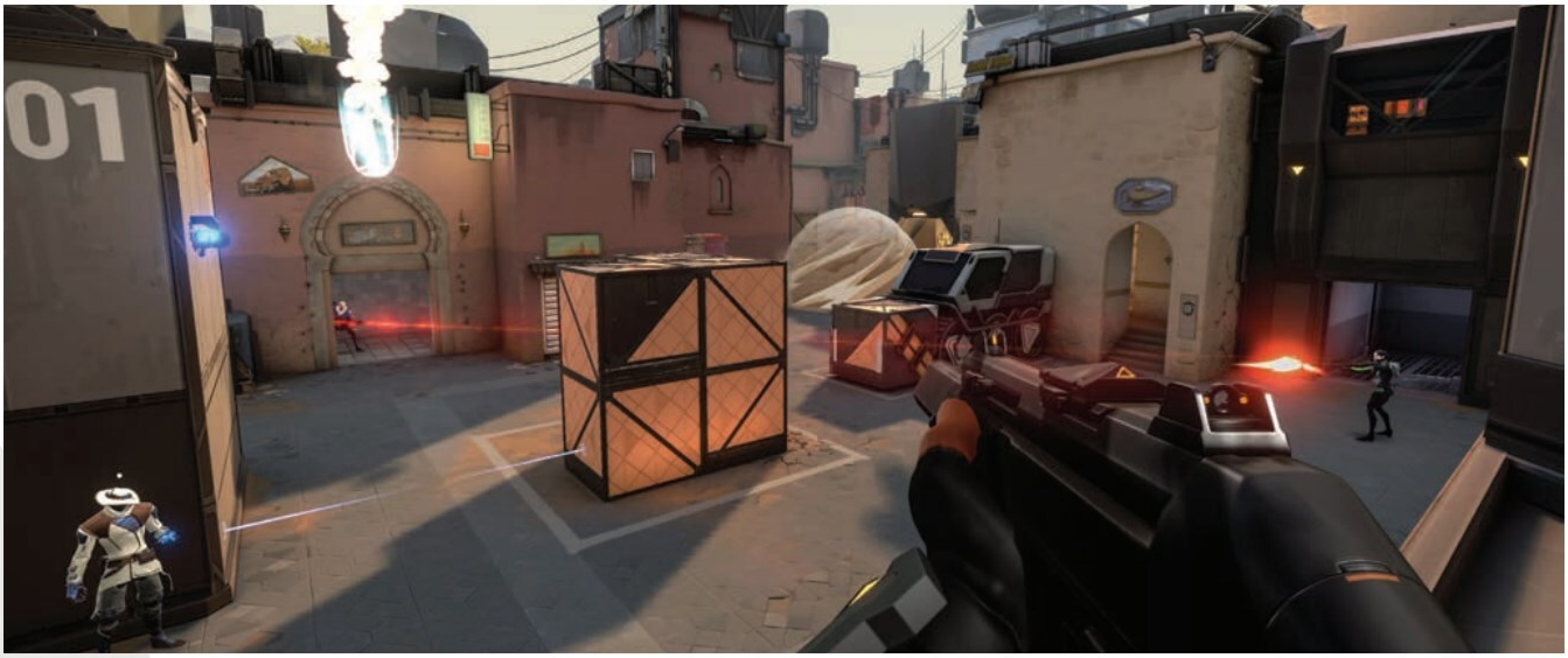
HYTALE

PLATFORM: PC • MAC • LINUX
RELEASE: 2021

If you are one of Minecraft's millions of fans who were disappointed by the cancellation of the Super Duper Graphics Pack, which would have updated Minecraft's graphics with new textures and visual effects, then you might want to pay special attention to Hytale. Hypixel Studios' upcoming sandbox crafting game lets groups of players explore a wide variety of randomly generated biomes, battle hordes of vicious creatures, and build an empire.

Still, Hypixel Studios hopes Hytale will be more than just a more visually detailed version of Minecraft. The studio plans to release all the tools it crafted throughout Hytale's development to provide fans with everything they need to create their own mods. Hypixel Studios actually started as a group of players who ran one Minecraft's most popular servers, so I'm willing to bet they understand the importance of keeping their community happy. » **BEN REEVES**





VALORANT

PLATFORM: PC
RELEASE: SUMMER

After becoming a household name with League of Legends, Riot Games is branching out more than ever before. With Valorant, Riot is stepping outside of the League universe to create a tactical hero-based shooter with a high skill ceiling that rewards coordinated teamplay. This free-to-play shooter is designed to be a living game, so while 12 heroes and 4 maps at launch might not sound like much, Riot has demonstrated it knows how to support a game over the long term. We can't wait to see how one of the biggest names in gaming fares in an already-crowded first-person shooter space. » **BRIAN SHEA**

LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • SWITCH • PC
RELEASE: TBA

War never changes – unless you're talking about Lego Star Wars. Over the years, TT Games has continually iterated on its classic family-friendly formula, but the core ideas haven't changed much since the first Lego Star Wars game in 2005. The Skywalker Saga is the biggest shift the series has ever seen. This co-op friendly action game takes players through events in all nine entries of the classic space opera. Each episode features its own open-world hub, and the combat has been entirely revamped. This particular Lego kit looks incredibly well-built and worth the wait. » **BEN REEVES**

RAINBOW SIX QUARANTINE

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 5 • XBOX SERIES X
PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: TBA

Since it was announced at E3 2019, Ubisoft has kept us all isolated from further details about its Rainbow Six spinoff. A brief trailer offered tantalizing few details, aside from the premise of a nightmarish infection and three-player co-op.

We're hopeful that the decision to put it under the Rainbow Six banner means that it will deliver the methodical, tactical combat that the studio has honed with Siege. That entry flirted with PvE combat in its Outbreak event, and the idea of battling through a fully fleshed-out version of that pandemic sounds like a cathartic way to deal with our current reality. » **JEFF CORK**

IRON MAN VR

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION VR
RELEASE: TBD

Iron Man's tactical heads-up display is a perfect fit for VR, and soaring through the air as this powerful hero could be exhilarating. Developer Camoflaj is promising a full story (with Ghost as a villain) and customizable armor handled in Tony Stark's garage. Next to Half-Life: Alyx, this is the VR game I've been waiting for most. » **ANDREW REINER**

FAST & FURIOUS CROSSROADS

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: TBA

With Vin Diesel, Michelle Rodriguez, and Tyrese Gibson reprising their roles in this official chapter in the Fast & Furious universe, this film series that always unfolded like a video game is now getting the proper video game treatment it deserves. Better yet, the chaotic driving is handled by Slightly Mad Studios, the team behind both of the Project Cars and Need for Speed: Shift series. » **ANDREW REINER**

WATCH DOGS: LEGION

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 5 • XBOX SERIES X • PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: TBA

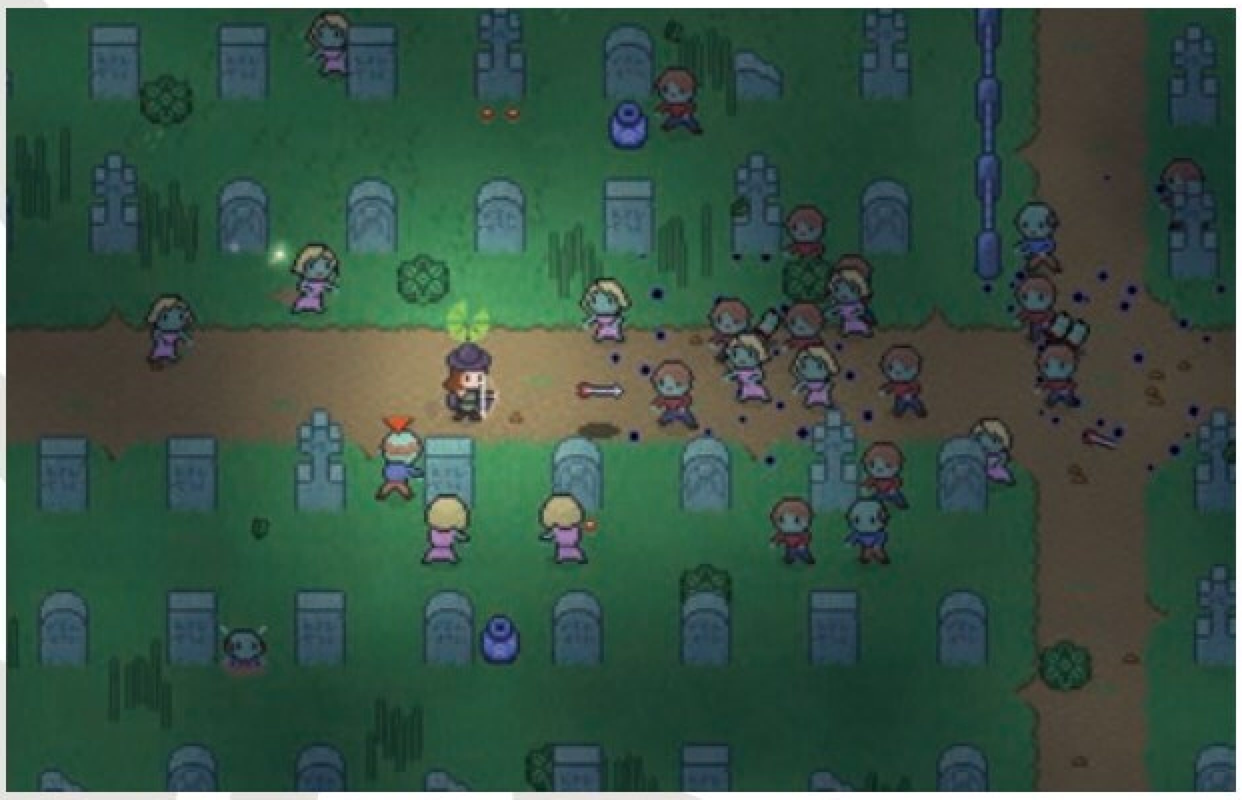
Part of hacker collective DedSec's power in Legion is in its anonymity, and grabbing control of virtually anyone in London to challenge the control of the modern surveillance state sounds intoxicating. Above and beyond this freedom, I'm excited for the actual power I'm going to be able to wield over my crew – visually and skill-wise – as they take back London. Hopefully, each person feels like a fully-fleshed out character with suitable missions. These possibilities, combined with the metropolis' plethora of neighborhoods (and Ubisoft's significant open world experience from the Assassin's Creed franchise), could combine for a big step forward in the genre. » **MATTHEW KATO**

ROGUE HEROES: RUINS OF TASOS

PLATFORM: PC
RELEASE: 2020

Drawing heavy inspiration from the 8-bit and 16-bit Legend of Zelda games, Rogue Heroes: Ruins of Tasos is an action/RPG that can be played either by yourself or by a group of four players. I recently played 20 minutes of it with a friend and adored the dungeon designs, which are filled with puzzles that factor in the number of players, such as one where we had to throw an orb back and forth through a dangerous maze.

Rogue Heroes also features hack 'n' slash combat, city building, farming, fishing, and an overworld filled with secrets. The movement feels great, the combat is challenging, and I adore the art style developer Heliocentric Studios has created. This is one of those games that came out of nowhere and should be on your radar. » **ANDREW REINER**



OUTRIDERS

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 5 • XBOX ONE SERIES X
PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: 2020

I know I'm not alone when I say any kind of escape from our current situation is welcome. The characters in Outriders take it a step further, leaving a ruined Earth in the rear-view mirror as humanity embraces the uncertainty of space. Does it go well? It's a third-person co-op shooter, so the answer is a resounding "Nope." People Can Fly added loot and flexible skills and abilities into its solid bullet-slinging action, making it more than yet another gun game.

We played Outriders for several hours, and it definitely left me wanting more. The tone is more serious than Borderlands, but it's not as unrelentingly bleak as The Division. The lack of a PvP component has allowed the devs to lean into the destruction and damage output, making you feel like the super-powered force that you truly are. Anyone can pull a trigger, but slowing down time and then stripping your foes of their skin? That takes an Outrider.

Creative director Bartek Kmita promises more reveals soon, and is confident that his team is still on track for release. "The current situation around COVID-19 has changed everyone's situations in weird ways, but we are still hard at work on Outriders for a Holiday 2020 launch." » **JEFF CORK**

TORCHLIGHT III

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: 2020

Torchlight certainly takes cues from Diablo, but it has kept players entertained, with its memorable action, loot-rich dungeons, and rich character customization. Sadly, we haven't seen a new entry in the series in close to eight years.

Torchlight III initially started as Torchlight Frontiers, with more MMO elements, but the developers realized what they were making was a successor to the previous titles, inspiring them to officially dub it, 'Torchlight III.' The new entry promises new classes, an upgradeable fort, and plenty of spoils as you explore the wilderness and defend Novastraia from invasion. And, yes, pets are also back! Torchlight was one of the few hack-and-slash loot-a-thons that actually could go head to head with Diablo, so color us intrigued if the time off served the series well. Can it come back and compete again? We sure hope so! » **KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

PATH OF EXILE 2

PLATFORM: PC
RELEASE: TBA

Path of Exile 2 gives players access to an entirely new campaign option that feeds into the same atlas endgame that Path of Exile offers, with tons of new changes and improvements. That means players can choose from either campaign for the leveling process and still end up at the meaty map-centric endgame that keeps players coming back for more adventures. Alongside the new campaign, the focus of PoE 2 is refining and improving current systems, like gem socketing, the passive skill tree, and more. Players can expect the same league-centric "seasonal" updates to keep things fresh, with a beta expected for late 2020 at the earliest. » **DANIEL TACK**

MARVEL'S AVENGERS

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • STADIA • PC
RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 4

Thanks to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the Avengers are some of the most recognizable heroes on the planet. And for good reason! Everyone probably wishes they had the incredible abilities of Captain America, Iron Man, or Thor. Later this year, Crystal Dynamics will let us live out those power fantasies in a sprawling superhero epic that takes fans on a journey across the Marvel Universe. As you struggle to reunite your team, you upgrade the Avenger's home base, set within a decommissioned Helicarrier. I can't wait to customize my favorite heroes with well-won gear in both the single-player campaign and the four-player co-op missions that will continue to release after launch. » **BEN REEVES**

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: 2020

The extent of my foray into the world of vampires doesn't extend much past *What We Do In the Shadows*, but the dense lore within Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2 got my attention.

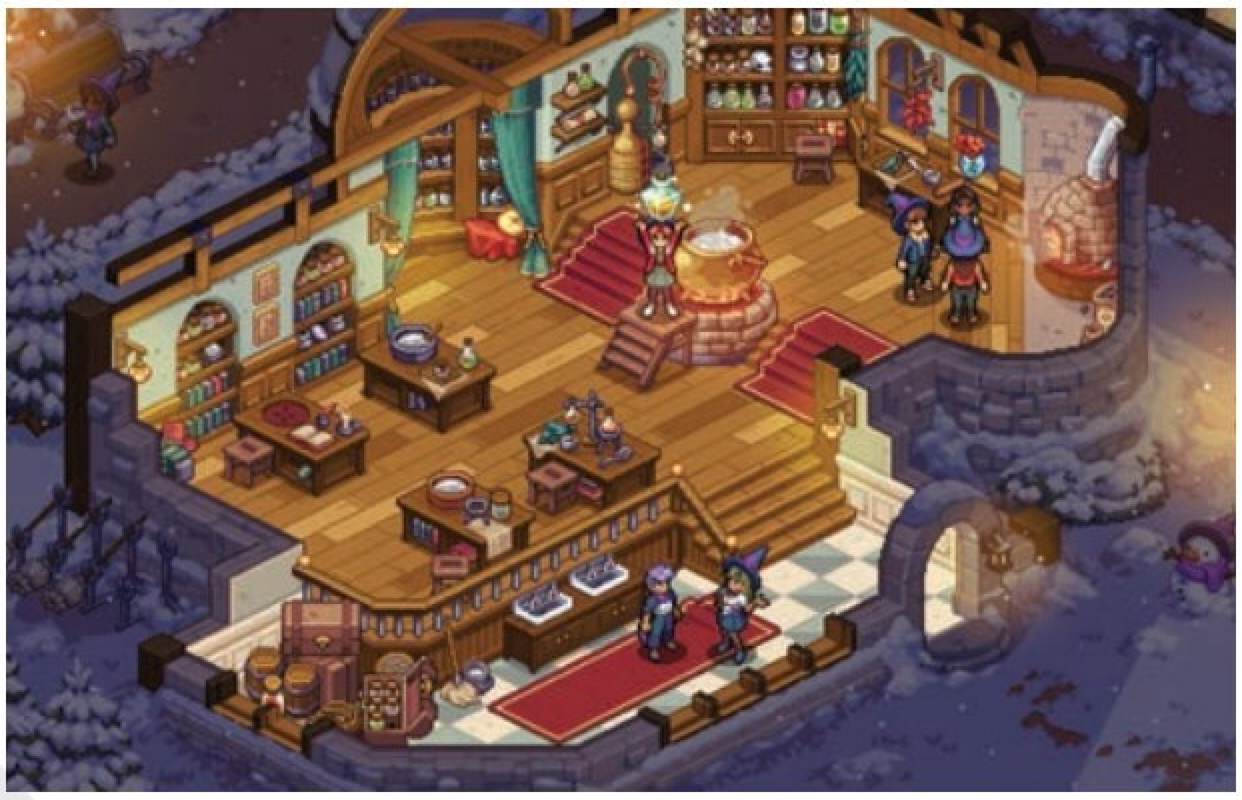
I'm interested in diving into the politics behind the various vampire factions as part of the overall worldbuilding developer Hardsuit Labs has created – whether that involves differing world philosophies or actual character abilities. Using vampiric powers, like flying, turning into mist, or being deadly charming in Seattle's open hub environments is intriguing in the context of navigating missions around the vampire clans.

It's even more so when you layer on vampires' tenuous relationship with the human world. Feeding on them for blood and ability enhancements, while trying not to lose my own shred of humanity, is an interesting dichotomy. Add on the visceral possibilities of the predominant use of the first-person perspective, and Bloodlines 2 presents an intriguing modern-day representation of vampires' eternal existence on the edge of our world. » **MATTHEW KATO**

EMPIRE OF SIN

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • SWITCH • PC
RELEASE: TBA

Legendary gaming gurus John and Brenda Romero and their team are bringing the 1920's Prohibition-era back. Players explore Chicago as gun-toting gangsters, but it's not a shooter. Instead, engage with a strategy/tactical turn-based ride as you use your mobster mashup to charm, intimidate, and blow your way out of trouble as you attempt to wrest control of the city from rival gangs and the authorities. How you choose to go about your rise to power is rife with decadent choices, from starting casinos, breweries, and speakeasies, to setting up protection rackets and expanding your influence across the city. Bribe and bully your way to the top, but keep in mind that your allies may be waiting for the opportune moment to shove a knife in your back and perform a coup. » **DANIEL TACK**



WITCHBROOK

PLATFORM: TBA
RELEASE: TBA

Chucklefish made a name for itself with games like Starbound and Wargroove, and for its publishing work on Stardew Valley. The studio's newest project looks especially intriguing, as players step into the shoes of a witch-in-training at a magic school, where they work to balance spellwork, life in the nearby town, and the really important stuff – like who to take to prom. The developer recently revealed a brand-new art style for Witchbrook, which boasts a gorgeous and colorful isometric presentation. The team is open in sharing that it's taking its time with the project, so while the game looks like it's coming along well, there are no details yet on platform or release. Perhaps it's too easy to say that Witchbrook looks like Stardew Valley set in a world very similar to the Harry Potter books – but, if the pointy shoe fits ... » **MATT MILLER**

MAGIC: LEGENDS

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • PC
RELEASE: TBA

Ever wanted to play a free-to-play action/RPG with Magic: The Gathering characters and cards? Well, now you can. Cryptic Studios brings the iconic Wizards of the Coast game into a new format, where players can take on a full-fledged story campaign, bite-sized "ordeal" content, and even battle other wizards in PVP duels. Magic: Legends graced our cover a few months back, and the combination of custom deck-building and fast-paced Diablo-esque action seems like an ambitious and exciting mix. » **DANIEL TACK**

OVERWATCH 2

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 • XBOX ONE • SWITCH • PC
RELEASE: TBA

Even after letting BlizzCon attendees sample Overwatch 2 last November, Blizzard won't communicate what year the game will release. We all want Overwatch 2 in 2020, but it sounds like it won't be here until 2021. In an interview with *Polygon*, Overwatch 2 game director Jeff Kaplan said "development is going great. The team's having tons of fun making the game, I feel like we're starting to understand it even more." *Polygon* later noted that Blizzard doesn't plan on revealing a release date this year.

In the few hours I played of Overwatch 2, I can confidently say it is going to be worth the wait. The foundation is the hero shooter we love, but the new avenues of play take it in different directions. One of those avenues is the Story Experience, something Overwatch 1 sorely needed. Rather than jumping online to watch animated shorts, players now get a full story in Overwatch 2. This cooperative mode features its own maps (not designed with MP in mind) that are filled with set-piece moments, boss fights, secrets, and more. The PvE experience also extends into Hero Missions, a separate mode that gives you the chance to power up heroes with new abilities.

Blizzard hopes PvE is just as big and rewarding as the PvP, which is also growing with the addition of the fun new mode called Push that plays like a game of tug of war with a robot replacing the rope. You won't even need to buy Overwatch 2 to enjoy the new PvP content. All of that will be playable in Overwatch 1, free of charge.

» ANDREW REINER

WARBIRDZ GYM

reviews

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 325

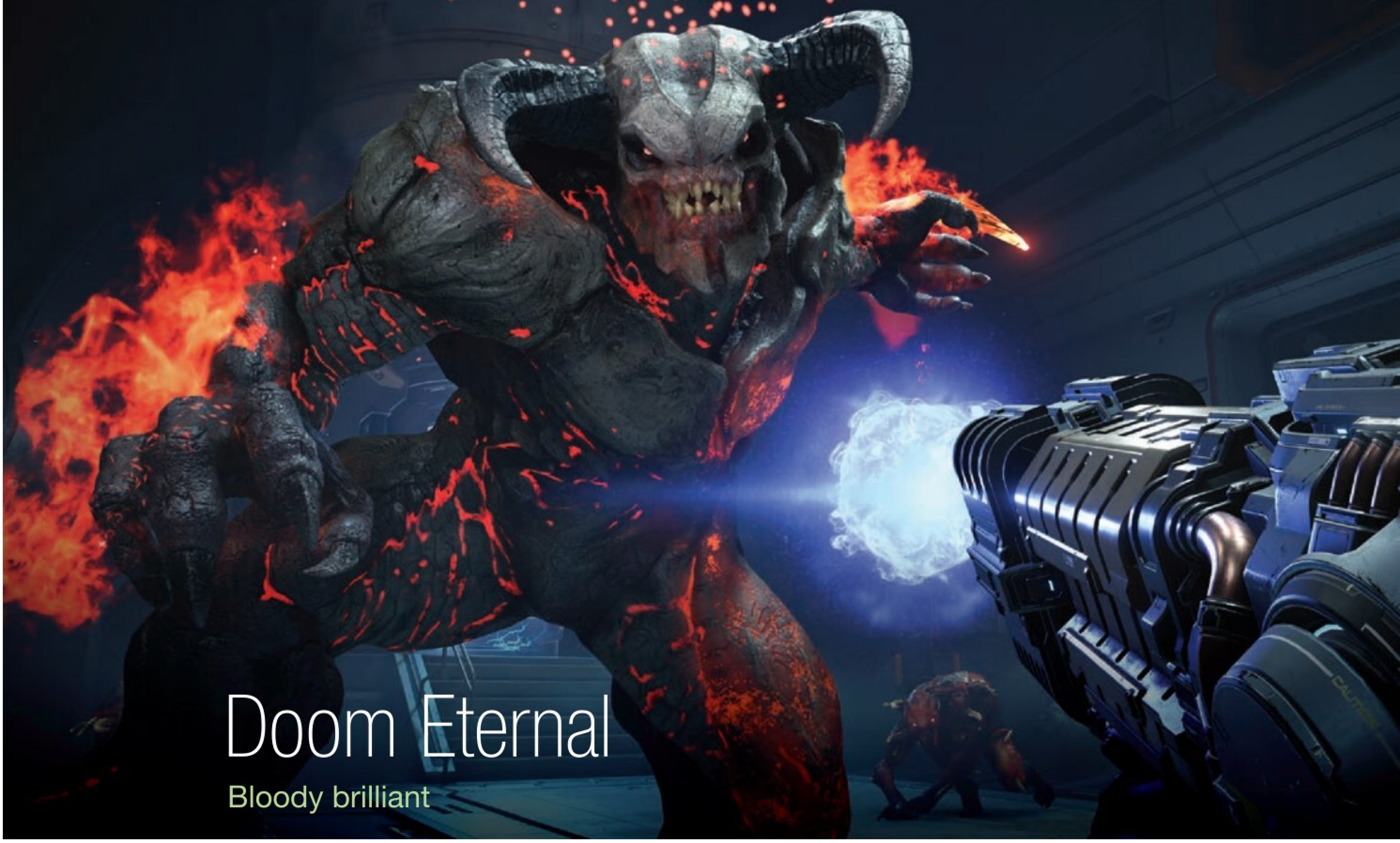
66 Doom Eternal

With a wider selection of weapons to use on twice as many demons, the Doom Slayer's return is every bit as wild, violent, and fun as we hoped. The immense firepower is joined by high-flying movement that allows the slayer to soar across the battlefield. Doom's 2016 reboot was impressive, but Doom Eternal blows it out of the bloody water.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Do we really have to say it?

Game informer
MPLS & MINN
OFFICIAL
GAME INFORMER MERCH
NOW AVAILABLE
gameinformer.com/merch



Doom Eternal

Bloody brilliant

9.25

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 325

Style 1-Player Shooter (3-Player Online) **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Developer** id Software **Release** March 20 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One
PC • Stadia

» Concept
A sequel that empowers the Doom Slayer with more weapons that he uses to punish an even bigger and deadlier demonic army

» Graphics
The game roars at a smooth clip and looks devilishly good. The forces of evil are shredded in extreme detail

» Sound
Mick Gordon's soundtrack is heavy, yet the beats are catchy. The double bass also lines up with the player's heartbeat when the fights get bloody

» Playability
New weapons and enemy types add significant layers of complexity to the combat. It's fast, fun, and loaded with variety

» Entertainment
The 2016 game now looks like a primer for a much more elaborate battle against the forces of hell

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Rip. Tear. Celebrate. Doom Eternal is an FPS feast that bombards players with adrenaline-soaked excitement and ridiculous amounts of gore. In this direct continuation to 2016's reimagining of Doom, developer id Software plays the role of angel and devil, empowering the legendary Doom Slayer with more might, while simultaneously giving the demons more hellish ways to inflict pain. This clashing of titans is a spectacle to behold. Explosions and guts soar across the battlefield as heavy metal pounds to the carnage. No matter who is left standing, the player is the beneficiary of the series' best combat, which hits an exhilarating fever pitch.

The Doom Slayer has always been powerful, but now he's armed to the teeth with a truckload of gear. He's carrying eight firearms and can call upon an awesome new shoulder-mounted launcher with a vast array of ammo types. Ranged combat isn't his only means of destruction, though. The Slayer also has a blade that extends from his arm to yank hearts out of chests, and when things get dire, he can once again whip out the Crucible, which is basically a one-hit kill. The selection of weapons gives players the tools to approach combat from a number of new vectors and change course on the fly, resulting in a deep and strategic experience that kicks like a mule.

Given how many enemies stand in the Slayer's way – not to mention the immense amounts of ammo needed to drop them – his weapons can deplete in a flash, leaving him with nothing but a noisy chainsaw (which is also a blast to use, especially since it rewards him with ammo for every gun). The combat, as gory as it may be, is beautifully orchestrated, and once again embraces the "push forward" design, meaning you need to keep moving from enemy to enemy in order to survive. Slowing down or ducking behind cover will almost certainly bring death. Even as you dart across the battlefield, demons teleport to your location and you need to drop them quickly to advance to the next dance of death.

With its new additions, Doom Eternal is a far more challenging game than its predecessor. That being said, it feels fair and manageable given the firepower you now pack and the numerous ways you can regain slivers of health. Part of the difficulty increase comes from the introduction of new enemy types. While the threat delivered by the pain elemental doesn't quite live up to its name, the archvile is a serious nuisance that must be dealt with immediately. He spawns enemies everywhere, protects himself with a fire shield, and has a thick hide that can soak up ammo. Most encounters, whether against foes old or new, put up a decent challenge and can be deadly if you are sloppy in your execution.

Many adversaries can take a beating, and you can now see it with your own eyes through awesome new cosmetic damage. Each shot picks away at their armor and flesh, and if they look like walking skeletons, they're surely ready to meet the reaper. This is a fantastic way of showing mid-battle progress, and it looks great.

When a foe is about to fall, you see it flash orange or blue, meaning you can execute them with a glory kill. These finishers are as gruesome as they are comical – one demon may be ripped in two, whereas another may have its head smashed into its chest like a whack-a-mole. Glory kills once again serve the role of a much-needed three-second breather that allows players to think about their next move (and also gain a little health back).

Much like the 2016 game, the action runs smoothly and is all about pinpoint precision and exploiting enemy weaknesses. The controls are beautifully fashioned, allowing players to quickly switch weapons, toggle between their various firing modes, and dart across the battlefield like a high-flying trapeze act.

The gunplay may be the bloody

centerpiece, but it is accented by greatly enhanced environmental traversal. The player can double jump, dash, latch onto walls, swing from poles, and even use a meat hook (which is fired from the super shotgun) to latch onto an enemy and zoom to its location. Some of these actions are sewn into combat, but when the last demon hits the ground, you will likely be tasked to use them to traverse hazardous terrain – complete with the spinning fireball chains from the Mario games. These sections are excellently designed, and require precise timing and trajectories. The platforming element also comes into play to solve environmental puzzles – perhaps to open a door or reach a new area.

Some of these puzzles are flat-out silly and feel out of place in a game like Doom Eternal. The greatest killer in the cosmos apparently has to shoot buttons and push blocks to figure out how to open doors. To ensure players aren't stumped for long, id Software even color-coded puzzle elements in glowing green, meaning you don't really have to put too much brainpower into them. They are more of a nuisance than anything.

Doom Eternal is overflowing with secrets to unearth; some are fun collectibles, and others simply flesh out the lore. The most important secrets are upgrades, and there are plenty to track down. Mods once again give your weapons special abilities that you switch between on the fly. For instance, the combat shotgun can fire sticky bombs or turn into a fully automatic weapon. These mods are clever and give each tool of destruction a decidedly different feel. You can also track down tokens to upgrade these mods, again giving you plenty of reason to explore the linear levels fully.

The Slayer's suit can be enhanced for both combat and cosmetic purposes, deepening the gameplay further. It even allows you to tweak the flow of play itself through runes. These powerful stones assist the player in everything from enhanced airborne movement control to slowing time at the brink of death, and much more. All of these upgrade systems make a huge difference.

On the multiplayer front, Doom Eternal is a huge step back for the entire series. You can't deathmatch, make your own maps, and the only option available at launch is an asymmetrical 2v1 experience called Battlemode. It's basically a game of cat and mouse between a human-controlled Slayer and two human-controlled demons. The Slayer, who has all of his gear from the campaign, is the cat. The battles are frantic, and playing as demons like the Revenant and Mancubus is amusing, but there isn't much meat on this multiplayer experience's bones, and it pales in comparison to the series' other offerings.

From a combat standpoint, you couldn't ask for much more from Doom Eternal. It roars with excitement, and just keeps getting bigger and better as it goes. Yes, it stumbles a little in puzzles, but players are frequently rewarded handsomely for making the efforts to crack them. Id Software made Doom relevant again with the 2016 game, and now the developer is clearly having fun showing players how wild this vision can get. **» Andrew Reiner**

EMERGEN ALERT SYSTEM
ERGENCY ALERT - Please remain indoors and bloc
all window
CIVIL AUTHOR
Contagious Di
WARNING

Resident Evil 3

A relentless terror

9

Style 1-Player Action (5-Player Online) **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** April 3 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Return to the Raccoon City zombie outbreak in this third-person shooter than reworks everything, including enemies, puzzles, and environments

» Graphics
Resident Evil 3 looks clean and crisp, and the monster designs are appropriately grotesque

» Sound
The soundtrack is intense, which matches the emphasis on action. Ambient effects and zombie moans set you on edge even when the bullets aren't flying

» Playability
Like the Resident Evil 2 remake, the over-the-shoulder gunplay feels good. Unfortunately, Jill's dodge is a bit inconsistent

» Entertainment
This is another spectacular remake for the series, and Nemesis is an imposing enemy who relentlessly chases you throughout the game

» Replay Value
Moderately high

I've always been fascinated by the concept of "persistence hunting" – the idea that a hunter doesn't need to run faster than its prey as long as they chase with dogged determination. Early human hunters would often pursue their game for hours – or even days – until they'd brought down some behemoths. After an extended chase, even the healthiest creatures must collapse, beaten and exhausted from the endless pursuit. It sounds like an incredibly terrifying way to meet your end, and if you ever wanted to know how that prey feels, play Resident Evil 3.

As with last year's Resident Evil 2, Capcom's newest remake is a smart update to the PlayStation classic. Many of the elements from the 1999 release have been remixed in this retelling of Jill Valentine's escape from Raccoon City's zombie outbreak. Capcom's original release was a more action-focused experience than previous entries, and this remake continues that tradition, but that isn't a bad thing since these firefights are so compelling. The action takes place from an over-the-shoulder, third-person perspective. Lining up a perfect headshot takes skill, as zombies stagger forward in erratic patterns, but the gunplay feels precise and exciting. My stomach regularly lurched into my throat as even small groups of undead crawled toward me. But when my back was against the wall, watching those zombie heads pop like melons proved especially satisfying.

Between firefights, Jill scavenges for meager supplies and collects various keys that open new areas, and I loved hunting down the right key or tool to unlock each new room. However, since Jill has less downtime between set-piece moments, she has fewer puzzles to complete than Resident Evil 2 or even the original Resident Evil 3. That is disappointing mainly because the few puzzles you encounter are so well done; they offer a nice change of pace, and I liked figuring out how to reroute subway trains or calculating the correct chemical mixture to create vaccines. Resident Evil 3's pace doesn't suffer much from this renewed focus on combat, and the moment-to-moment action remains compelling.

VERYTHING
WANT

The biggest reason Jill rarely has a second to catch her breath is Nemesis. This 10-foot monster was created in one of Umbrella's labs for the sole purpose of assassinating Jill. Nemesis is a grotesque figure who might send shivers down your spine with just one look, but this monster is even more imposing in motion. Unlike Resident Evil 2's Mr. X, Nemesis is nimble and fast enough to keep pace with you. He follows you around the map, can leap in front of you to block your path, and reaches out to trip you with his tendrils. Whenever Nemesis shows up, you need to either run or dig in for a resource-draining battle. This makes each encounter with him as thrilling as it is terrifying, and when you do finally escape Nemesis' grasp, the sense of relief is palpable.

The journey is full of relentless beatdowns, and you'd be foolish to try to take down every enemy you encounter. Jill's new dodge maneuver allows her to escape almost every conflict without a scratch – if you can pull it off consistently. When you time Jill's dodge perfectly, you slow time and have the chance to squeeze off a few free headshots. Unfortunately, the timing window for this dodge feels off; even near the end of the game, I still got hit by enemies even after I was sure I had properly dodged. That inconsistency is unfortunate, because dodging is incredibly empowering when it works.

Your race through Raccoon City is the main course, but the Resistance multiplayer mode is also worth a look. In this asymmetrical 4v1 mode, groups of survivors work together to kill hordes of zombies and find several keys, which allow them to escape Umbrella's labs. I appreciate the variety among the survivors, since some heroes excel in close-quarters combat while others function as support classes. I found a good routine sitting back from the front lines, disabling traps, and helping my teammates find useful equipment, but charging into the fray is also exciting. When you get a really good team together, you feel like you can overcome even the deadliest traps.

Playing as a survivor in Resistance was a fun diversion, but I got a greater thrill when I took on the mantle of a mastermind. These devious characters work from the shadows and scheme to keep the survivors in line. As a match builds, masterminds accumulate a steady stream of resources, which they can spend to set up traps and unleashing hordes of undead monsters. I laughed with sick glee after saving up a mountain of resources to spend in a single room that tied up my survivors for several minutes, which ultimately won me the match. Masterminds offer a more strategic level of play that I haven't seen in a Resident Evil game before, and I hope Capcom continues to iterate on these mechanics down the road.

With this remake, Capcom has greatly improved one of my least-loved entries in the series. Resident Evil 3's greater focus on action affords you fewer opportunities to stop and think, but Jill's adventure is an incredible thrill ride. From the first moment that Nemesis burst through the wall and reached out with one of his tendrils, I felt my heart begin to race. I don't think it slowed down again until the credits rolled. » **Ben Reeves**

Roundguard

Roguish charm

8

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** The Quantum Astrophysicists Guild, Wonderbelly Games
Developer Wonderbelly Games **Release** March 13 **Rating** E10+

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC • iOS

» Concept
Borrow liberally from Peggle and roguelike dungeon crawlers to create a whimsical hybrid

» Graphics
Cartoonish heroes and monsters keep the tone affable and light

» Sound
Jaunty and inoffensive tunes seem to directly reference the instrumentation and style of Peggle

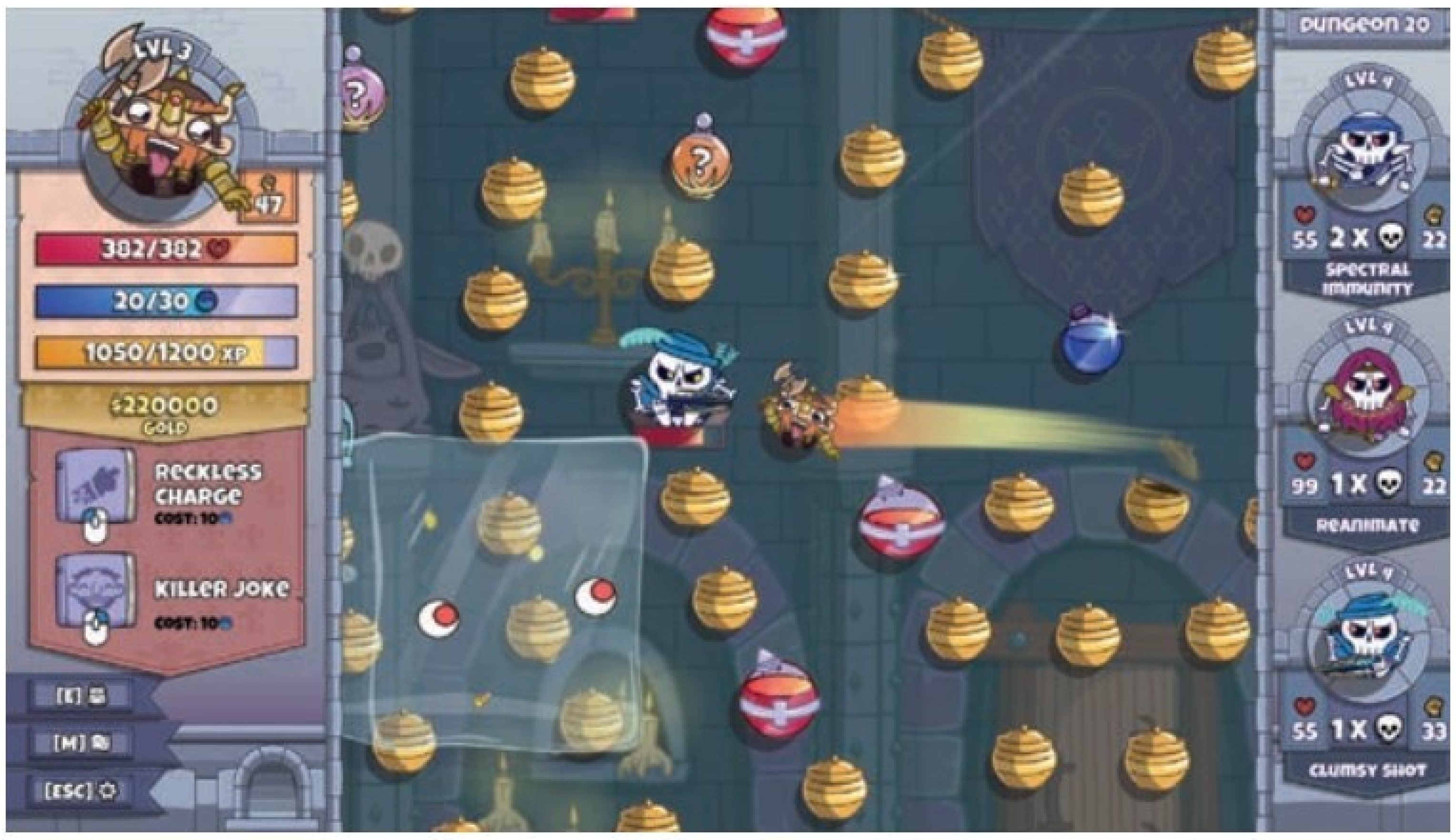
» Playability
With a healthy balance between luck and smart shot placement, the controls are immediately accessible and fun to learn

» Entertainment
Cutesy and clever, this repeatable adventure captures many of the addictive qualities that made its inspirations into phenomena

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Upon starting my first game of Roundguard, I couldn't escape a sense of surprise that this hasn't been done before. At first glance, Roundguard looks like a copy of the hugely popular Peggle, but with a fantasy theme. That alone might have been enough to propel Wonderbelly's debut to success, but it's the integration of roguelike elements that propel this new project into its own orbit, transforming what could have been a shameless knock-off into a simple but rewarding game with an identity all its own.

Players control a rotund warrior, rogue, or wizard as they descend into the dungeons beneath a castle. On each turn, you launch your intrepid adventurer into a field of monsters, gold pots, and potions, then watch as your character bounces and rebounds from one end of the stage to the other. Along the way, you deploy spells and skills that alter trajectory, damage baddies, and boost your gains. Thanks to the varied skills of each class, a healthy balance emerges between the unpredictable careening of your character and when you choose to activate abilities. Like in Peggle, there's something deeply satisfying about the Pachinko-style descent through a stage, watching with anticipation to chart a path to the bottom.



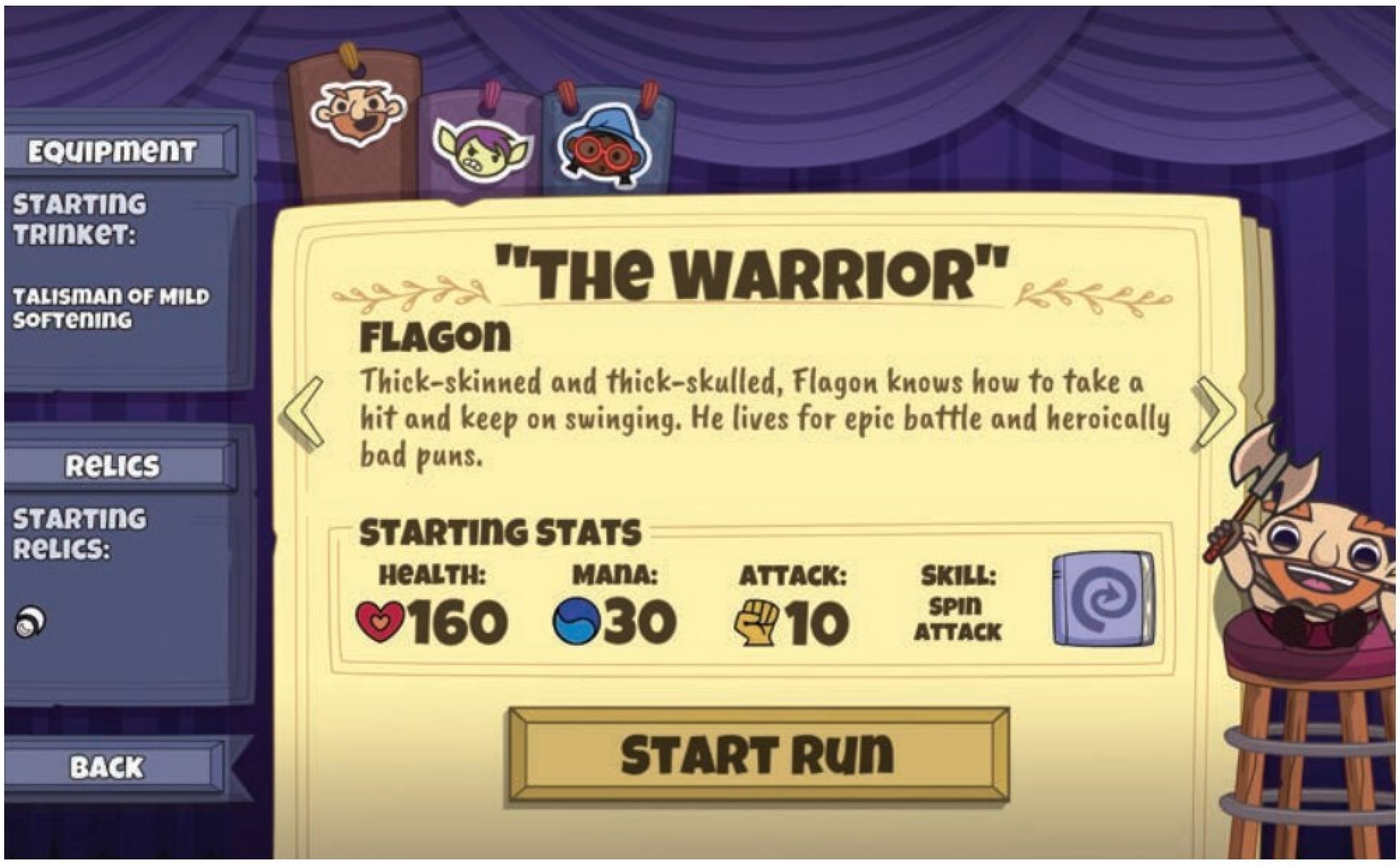
I enjoy all three classes; Wonderbelly has done a good job emulating classic RPG archetypes, from the wizard's screen-nuking lightning bolts to the rogue's versatile double jump. I spent most of my playtime going back and forth on my favorite, which is a sign of strong balance. Three classes at launch feels good but not great; without a broader selection of heroes, it's easy for the choice to grow stale. As it is, I felt like I'd seen much of what each option had to offer after a few hours of play.

Thankfully, roguelike elements lend additional replayability. The layout of stages and the interconnected map between them changes each time, so you're rarely left with the sense that you've witnessed the exact same playthrough before. On each run, you also collect and equip various weapons and armor pieces that accentuate a given playstyle. That's a fun addition, but it is sometimes disheartening when random equipment drops hold you back from success because they don't jibe with with your abilities. Without broader flexibility to collect and keep items to equip at my leisure, it's hard to reach an optimized build. Being forced to toss an item early in a run (only to wish for it back three stages later) sometimes left me frustrated.

Stackable trinkets have no limit, which is a fun way of building power over the course of a playthrough. You're assigned a random trinket at the start of a run, which you acquired at the end of your last. That's a smart incentive for continued play, but without any choice for that trinket, it sometimes feels like a meaningless gesture, with a bonus that doesn't help your preferred playstyle.

Meanwhile, relics offer a longer form of engagement for dedicated players. Acquired for completing a full run, you can only master them by completing a second run with the relic equipped. The often challenging modifications provided by these relics can be mixed and matched for any given run, changing the flow for experienced players, and further extending the life of the game. I had a lot of fun trying to eke out a win with challenging relic combos in effect.

Roundguard is charming and engaging, both in extended sit-downs and in shorter intermittent play sessions. Silly characters and nemeses draw heavily on established fantasy and strike the right tone for the light nature of play. Peggle veterans who have longed for a sequel should definitely play this clear homage. But even newcomers to this style of bouncy-ball fun will find a lot to smile about in this friendly dungeon descent. » **Matt Miller**



STARTING TRINKET:
TALISMAN OF MILD SOFTENING

STARTING RELICS:

"THE WARRIOR"

FLAGON

Thick-skinned and thick-skulled, Flagon knows how to take a hit and keep on swinging. He lives for epic battle and heroically bad puns.

STARTING STATS

HEALTH: 160
MANA: 30
ATTACK: 10
SKILL: SPIN ATTACK

Bleeding Edge

Exchanging soft blows

Style 8-Player Online Action **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios **Developer** Ninja Theory **Release** March 24 **Rating** E

Bleeding Edge is a unique 4v4 competitive experience that shows a little flash in its third-person approach, but doesn't deliver much of a punch in combat or enough variation in its match types and maps. Developer Ninja Theory draws clear inspiration from Blizzard's Overwatch, delivering similar hero-focused play, with each teammate playing a critical role as a tank, support, or damage dealer. While some of the Overwatch nods are a little too obvious, like a hip, headphone-wearing healer who just happens to be from Rio De Janeiro, or a tank who can take off in a sprint to slam an opponent into a wall, Ninja Theory brings its own brand of creativity to the heroes. However, that style only goes so far, and the fun they generate flatlines after just a few hours.

Launching out of a safe zone on hoverboards towards the enemy is a fun way to kick off a match, and the introductory clash that takes place gives a good read of the strategies being deployed by both sides. Your team's healer could be targeted by a ninja named Daemon who can turn invisible to sneak onto your backline. His stealth threat will need to be countered or he'll create chaos for your healer all match long. If you are overly aggressive in your push, you may even be lured into a zone filled with turrets by the gun-wielding Gizmo, or the witch Maeve could subdue your tank in a magical cage for an easy team assault.

The character abilities are well thought out, are nicely balanced in terms of cooldowns, and their strategies can be figured out quickly and used effectively. Ninja Theory did a nice job with the introductory 11 fighters; each approach combat in different ways, and they look amazing. One character has a snake for an arm, another rides around on a gas-filled balloon. Ninja Theory also makes sure that their unique looks are reflected in play and put to good use.

Given the third-person viewpoint, melee strikes and combos are a big part of the experience, but so are medium-range attacks – you can't snipe in these battles, you need to be relatively close to deal any damage. Since players are twitchy in movement, a handy lock-on system keeps you glued to your target, meaning if you are close, you're going to hit them unless they time an evasive move or parry you – both of these abilities are handled well and feel great when executed properly. The melee attacks, as powerful as they look, don't deliver that satisfying weight of contact, and all opponents have plenty of health, so you need to hack at or shoot at them a bunch. What usually happens, if you don't have the help of other teammates, is your opponent runs away, and you chase them, and they run more, and you chase more, picking at them slowly or disengaging entirely. The slowness of the base movements and the massive amounts of open space to maneuver steal away the intensity of the one-on-one battles. Most of the kills I achieved weren't satisfying and were either oddly played out wars of attrition or getting a lucky last shot on a running foe.

At launch, Bleeding Edge offers two match types: Power Collection, the better of the two, sees teams collecting canisters that appear on the map and turning them in to zones for points, and Objective Control, where players capture and hold zones to score points. Power Collection has a nice risk/reward mechanic in that if you grab a canister, the opponent can kill you and take it. If you are sitting on nine canisters, you become a target and your teammates will hopefully try to protect you. While the maps deliver different hazards like moving trains, missile strikes, and electrical fences, there are only five at launch and the feeling of being in the same place again sinks in quickly.

Longevity also isn't found in the unlockable content for each fighter. Most of the skins are just color swaps, and the decals on the hoverboards can't really be seen while playing. Additionally, the mods you earn for leveling up, while giving small bumps to abilities, are a lackluster reward overall. The best unlockables are taunts, which are humorous, yet you'll likely use them most in the pre-match lobby.

Bleeding Edge has plenty of potential and I had fun with it in my first couple of hours, yet lost interest in it quickly, as the battles alone weren't enough of an allure to keep going. Like most living competitive games, there's a chance Ninja Theory could greatly enhance the experience over time. For the time being, however, it's entertaining for a bit and then it fades fast. » **Andrew Reiner**

6.75

Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
A 4v4 online battler that is a little slow and light on content, yet can deliver intensity when teams are strategizing

» **Graphics**
The cartoonish fighter designs are excellently crafted and the worlds are filled with color and plenty of detail

» **Sound**
Much like Overwatch, the fighters call out their special attacks. The sounds tied to the abilities are quite good, and the announcer calling out capture point changes is helpful

» **Playability**
The fighter classes and abilities are nicely balanced, but most attacks just pick away at enemies and don't make you feel that powerful

» **Entertainment**
Bleeding Edge is engaging for a few hours and then heavy repetition sinks in

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Call Of Duty: Warzone

Coming back for more

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
A grand battle involving 150 players unfolds on a gigantic map full of activities and weapons

» Graphics
Like Modern Warfare, the game looks amazing whether you're shooting from the back of a truck or posted up in a grocery store

» Sound
Important audio cues guide gameplay, making sound an essential part of the experience

» Playability
Jumping in is easy, making this one of the more approachable titles in the genre

» Entertainment
Warzone trades the complexity and tension of other battle royale games for streamlined, constant action with some great new twists – and it works

» Replay Value
High

Style Online Multiplayer Shooter **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Infinity Ward **Release** March 10 **Rating** M

Warzone eschews the moments from other battle royales where you're perched for minutes on end, staring down your scope at a barn where you think an enemy might be hiding. Instead, it goes all-in on familiar Call of Duty shooting, throws in color-coded loot, and removes all inventory management. It's a stark contrast from Black Ops 4's Blackout, which was more rooted in creating intense, lethal meetings between teams – here, you want to seek out your next fight at all times, and death often isn't the end. You're in there to blast your enemy, and the focus on that singular goal works. While those who want to cobble together the perfect weapon and find the perfect sniper's roost may be better off in another battle royale, the bid to take Call of Duty's top-notch gunplay into a much larger field is a fun (and standalone/free!) change of pace from Team Deathmatch, Headquarters, and Kill Confirmed.

Warzone smartly incentivizes constant action. If you're not looking for another team to engage, don't worry, because they'll find you instead. Other battle royale games can be over quickly thanks to "one and done" formats that means you're out for the match when you die. However, Warzone can often go on much longer due to some smart mechanics that offer opportunities to come back into the conflict even after death. The first addition is the Gulag, a feature that whisks you away to an isolated off-map prison. The first time you die, you're sent to a battle to the death with one other fallen player – a 1v1 gunfight in which both players have the same loadout, and the victor gets catapulted back into the main match.

If you're playing with friends, the Gulag is even more fun during a team-wipe scenario. As you wait in the queue for your own 1v1 redemption match, you can watch your teammates' fights – but you aren't just a passive observer. You can throw rocks in an attempt to disorient a player down in the death pit, or even convey intel to your teammates about the enemy's movements.

Should you die in the Gulag, you still have more chances to return to the game, like your teammates buying you back for a modest sum at stations scattered across the map. These comeback mechanics take away the sting of death from the battle royale experience. Although they deplete the intensity and tension, they also keep players fighting and more willing to engage in combat instead of acting as strict survivalists.

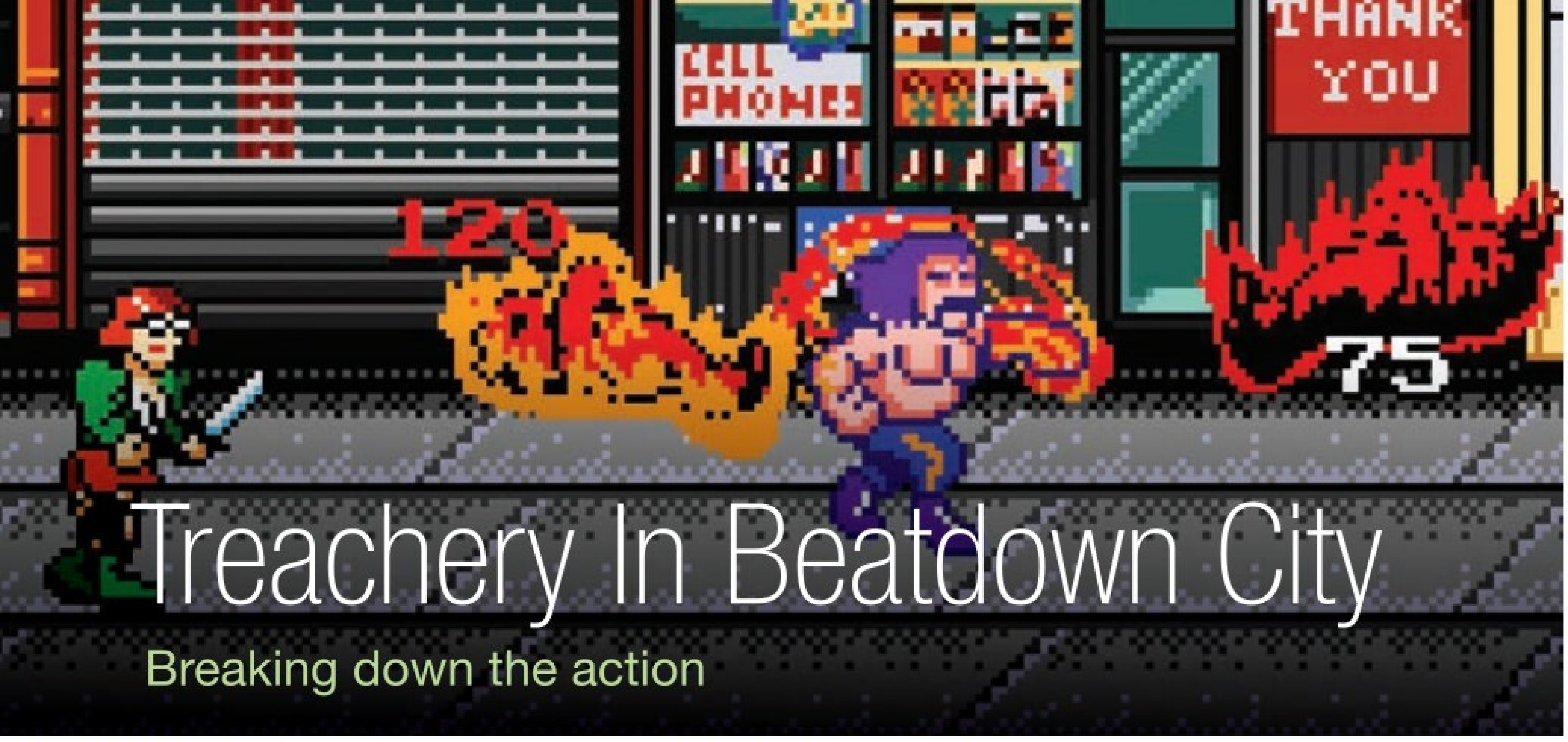
Another clever way Warzone guides players to continual friction is via a contract system. In each area, various contracts task players with opening supplies, gaining control of an area, and hunting bounties. Bounty contracts tell you where your target is, and reward you for tracking them down and eliminating them. Of course, this means you're going to have to take out their teammates too, and bounties can be placed on you and your friends. A tracker keeps you informed of how close you are to your hunter/prey, so this system is more about forcing action between two groups than it is about a being a predator, since either side can come out on top.

As you collect weapons and take out players, you start to accumulate money. You can spend it at stations for a variety of perks, but the most important investment (beyond bringing your friends back from the grave) is the loadout drop. Here, you can import your loadouts from Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, which can give you a distinct edge in battle, since you are probably far more proficient with your comfort weapons than you are with random guns on the ground. You face a significant risk/reward with calling in a loadout that drops from the sky, as other players and teams nearby are alerted and may want the haul for themselves. All of these various injections to the battle royale formula are great, and keep the fight raging at all times. No skirting the outskirts trying to track down holdouts hiding in bathrooms – get in there!

The core battle royale game in Warzone is by far my favorite mode, but players looking for a large-scale experience without any of the knockout risks may gravitate to Plunder instead. With no circle to stay in and infinite respawns, Plunder is a decidedly less-intense experience where the goal is to collect the most money and not lose it by dying. Big-bankroll players are highlighted on the map, so running around with a stash is quite risky – teams can bank their dosh by airlifting it off the battlefield, so you need to continually decide where your time is best spent, either by avoiding other players and squirreling money away or by become a big-time bounty hunter after the big purses. Plunder lacks much of the gravity and weight of the standard battle royale, but that may be exactly what you're looking for.

Infinity Ward's battle royale offering doesn't reinvent the genre, but it does add systems that keep you ravenous for constant carnage instead of precision survival. With a bit of arcade flash and an intelligent engagement loop, Warzone is easy to enjoy.

» Daniel Tack



Treachery In Beatdown City

Breaking down the action

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Nuchallenger **Developer** Nuchallenger, HurakanWorks **Release** March 30 **Rating** T

Treachery in Beatdown City is a runner that starts strong, but loses steam with each leg of the race. The innovative twist on beat-em-ups initially had me intrigued and exited. In pixelated city stages, you maneuver your hero into place in front of a combatant before pausing and selecting from a variety of moves like you might in an RPG, and then unpausing the action to see how it all plays out – similar in some respects to modern Fallout games and their V.A.T.S. system. And in those early minutes, the narrative suggests an incisive and satirical snipe at societal ills. But narrative and gameplay fail to meaningfully evolve, and both core elements begin to show their flaws with each passing combat.

President Blake Orama has been kidnapped by ninjas, and it's up to a scrappy group of street fighters from the inner city to save him. Along the way, they're confronted by irate motorcycle-club members, rude private security, and pushy grifters. Each fiery dialogue exchange exposes the absurdity of some aspect of modern life, with a particular focus on gentrification and casual racism. Unfortunately, the satire is so heavy-handed and sophomoric that the humor falls flat, and what aims to be sharp social commentary loses its edge when the heroes are almost as problematic as their foes, ready to issue a beatdown to people on the sidewalk for the barest of slights.

Players should also be aware that the game is incomplete and episodic, and barely touches on the core kidnapping plot described at the outset. The multi-hour offering that makes up this purchase includes an opening two chapters that together feel meandering and almost without connection to the initial conflict. A future update promises new chapters, but the current playthrough already overstays its welcome.

That's because the real-time/turn-based hybrid simply doesn't hold up to extended scrutiny, and the successful nuances it does offer up are not adequately highlighted over the course of the game. Three distinct characters each have their own combat styles, but after an initial explanation, you never get clear guidance on how to play them successfully. I had to start a separate playthrough and replay the first hour, just to figure out how the different actions, meters, and enemies are meant to be understood, and even then, elements of how it all fits together remained opaque.

Low-risk strikes and high-risk grapples are both options, but it's difficult to know which actions are called for in a given exchange, or recall which enemies are vulnerable to what. Weapons and revenge attacks attempt to add new layers later in the game, but neither give the boost needed to elevate the experience. Plus, even if you do get into the flow, any sense of momentum is sapped each time you return to the Super Mario World-style map after each battle.

Treachery in Beatdown City didn't work for me, but it's a far more creative and ambitious project than many of its contemporaries. Its subject matter is timely, and I enjoyed the attempt to reinterpret some of city life's problems through the lens of old-school games like Double Dragon. The idea of RPG menu-selected moves in a beat-em-up is clever, even if the implementation here didn't hit the mark. As it is, even with a lot of creativity on display, it's just not a city I recommend visiting. » **Matt Miller**

6.25

Switch • PC

» **Concept**
Confront gentrification and casual racism with a punch to the face in this hybrid beat-em-up that juggles real-time and turn-based combat

» **Graphics**
The 8-bit pixel graphics style recalls the earliest roots of urban brawlers

» **Sound**
A few excellent chiptunes set the mood, but too much repetition threatens to break the spell

» **Playability**
The unusual pause-to-menu combat system is initially explained well, but many of its nuances can get lost without clearer ways to review concepts later in the game

» **Entertainment**
Innovative mechanics make a strong first impression, but the action, music, and bombastic tone of the narrative all wear thin after a few hours

» **Replay Value**
Low

AVAILABLE MAY 22, 2020
MANEATER
MANEATER
PRE-ORDER
TIGER SHARK ADAPTATION
"LIKE THE TIGER SHARK, OFTEN CALLED THE "GARBAGE CAN OF THE OCEAN," THIS EVOLUTION ALLOWS YOU TO DIGEST NEARLY ANYTHING. IT INCREASES YOUR ABILITY TO GAIN VITAL NUTRIENTS FROM YOUR PREY.
Pre-Order at
GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS
MATURE 17+ M ESRB
Blood and Gore
Drug Reference
Intense Violence
Mature Humor
Mild Language
DEEP SILVER
XBOX ONE
PS4
TRIPWIRE

Final Fantasy VII Remake

Old friends and new life

8.75

PS4

» Concept
Recreate one of the most popular RPGs ever, including exciting new twists on the combat and setting

» Graphics
The main characters, monsters, and cinematics are all gorgeous. Some of the environments have bland designs and textures popping in, but the issues aren't pervasive

» Sound
New music blends well with the revised versions of old favorites, making this an amazing soundtrack. When the dialogue sounds awkward, it's usually a problem with the writing rather than the voice performance

» Playability
Combat and exploration usually feel great, but some overly busy battles make it difficult to parse all of the important information

» Entertainment
Final Fantasy VII Remake finds a satisfying balance between innovation and tradition, delivering flashy battles and fun systems mixed with nods for old-school fans

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Square Enix **Release** April 10 **Rating** M

The original Final Fantasy VII is one of the most influential and adored games of all time, representing the best storytelling, gameplay, and technology its era had to offer. Its monumental impact on the role-playing genre is hard to overstate – but even harder to replicate in today's landscape. That struggle between history and innovation is the engine that drives Final Fantasy VII Remake; the legend of the original looms large over it like the metal plates above the slums of Midgar, but this new version refuses to simply exist under a shadow. With smart (and surprising) additions to a classic world and its inhabitants, Final Fantasy VII Remake artfully appeals to nostalgia without being bound by it.

The story follows Cloud and a small band of mercenaries as they fight back against Shinra, a huge company with its hands in everything from experimental weapons to space travel. If you played the original, you will recognize many locations, people, and plot points. But Square Enix has also liberally reimagined and reinterpreted many elements – but not so much that anything is unrecognizable. This is Final Fantasy VII Remake's biggest asset, because it lets old fans relive their memories while welcoming new players with its iconic characters and unique setting.

Cloud and his companions are still the heroes, but the city of Midgar is the real star now. This game is entirely focused on the portion of Final Fantasy VII's story that unfolds in this industrial, corporate-controlled metropolis. Midgar's political conspiracies, everyday desperation, and quiet hope shine through as you explore the different neighborhoods and see the consequences of Shinra's greed. People live in grimy shacks, huge reactors drain the planet's life force, and ruins stand as reminders of past tragedies. The maps aren't as freeform or dynamic as an open-world RPG, but I still appreciate the opportunity to linger in an area and get to know its citizens – if only through a selection of basic side quests involving item retrieval and monster killing.

If you're comparing versions of this world, the remake offers a dramatic expansion of many areas. A whole settlement replaces the few static screens that once represented the sector 7 slums. Wall Market is now a lawless den of sin rather than a few sketchy tents. These areas feel like natural extensions of the world, building the lore and adding context to characters' interactions. However, a few new zones feel like overcomplicated padding, such as a prolonged and uneventful journey under the sector 4 plate. But even if the experience doesn't maximize every minute, my thorough 50-hour playthrough (plus some post-game content) provided plenty of memorable moments.

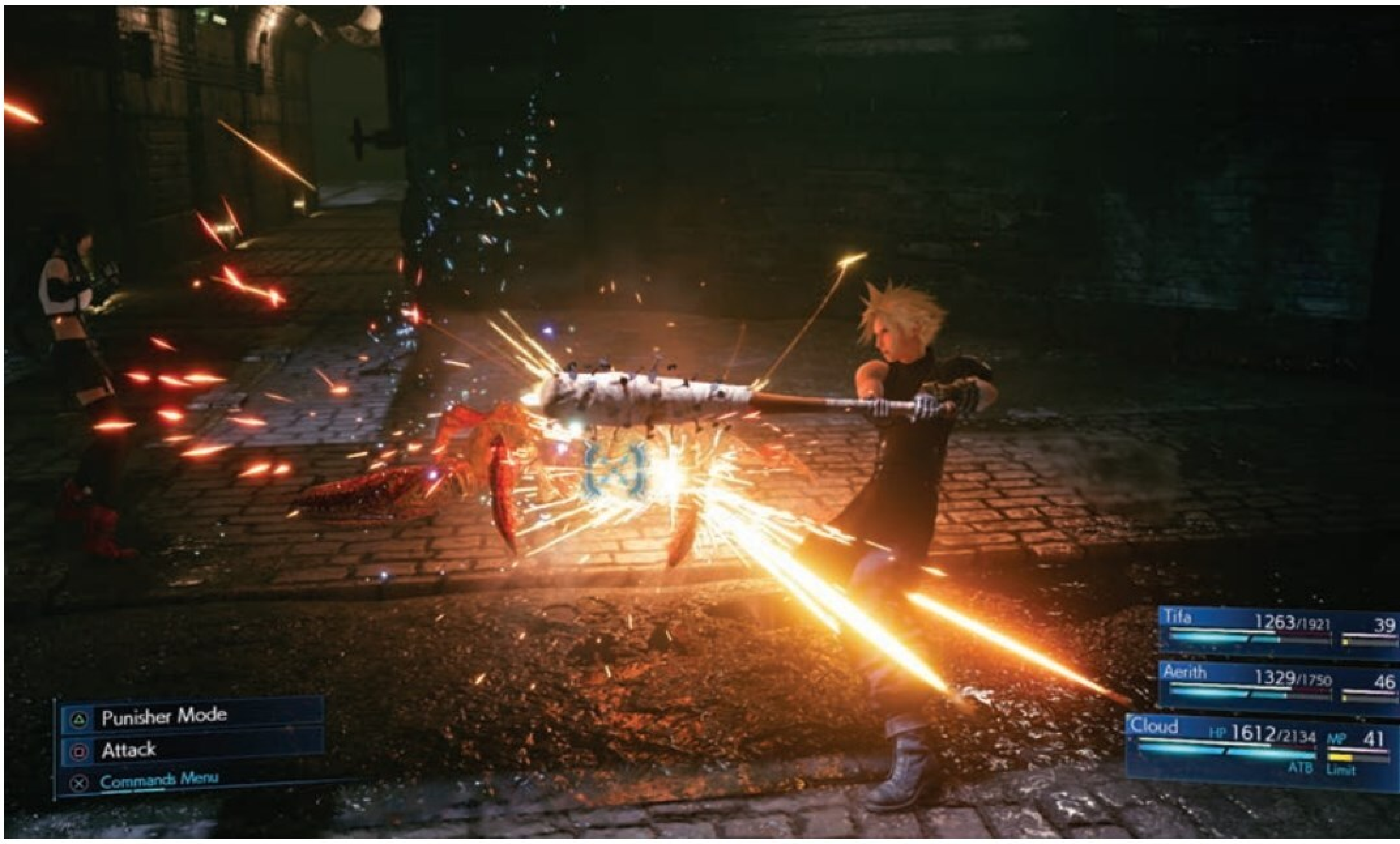
Many of those moments are thanks to Final Fantasy VII Remake's battle system, which is a compelling fusion of stylish action and conventional turn-based mechanics. You control the characters' basic movement and attacks directly, but can select specific spells and special moves through a menu. This gives fights a kinetic, cinematic flair without sacrificing the need to carefully assess the evolving situation. Every party member controls differently, and you can swap among them on the fly; you might weaken an enemy from afar with Barret's arm cannon, but then go in with Tifa's powerful melee strikes once the foe is staggered. This approach is an immensely entertaining way to let each character shine, and fantastic animation and creature design makes the encounters look spectacular. They don't require pinpoint precision, but they also don't reward button-mashing, so a majority of battles find the perfect balance between strategy and style.

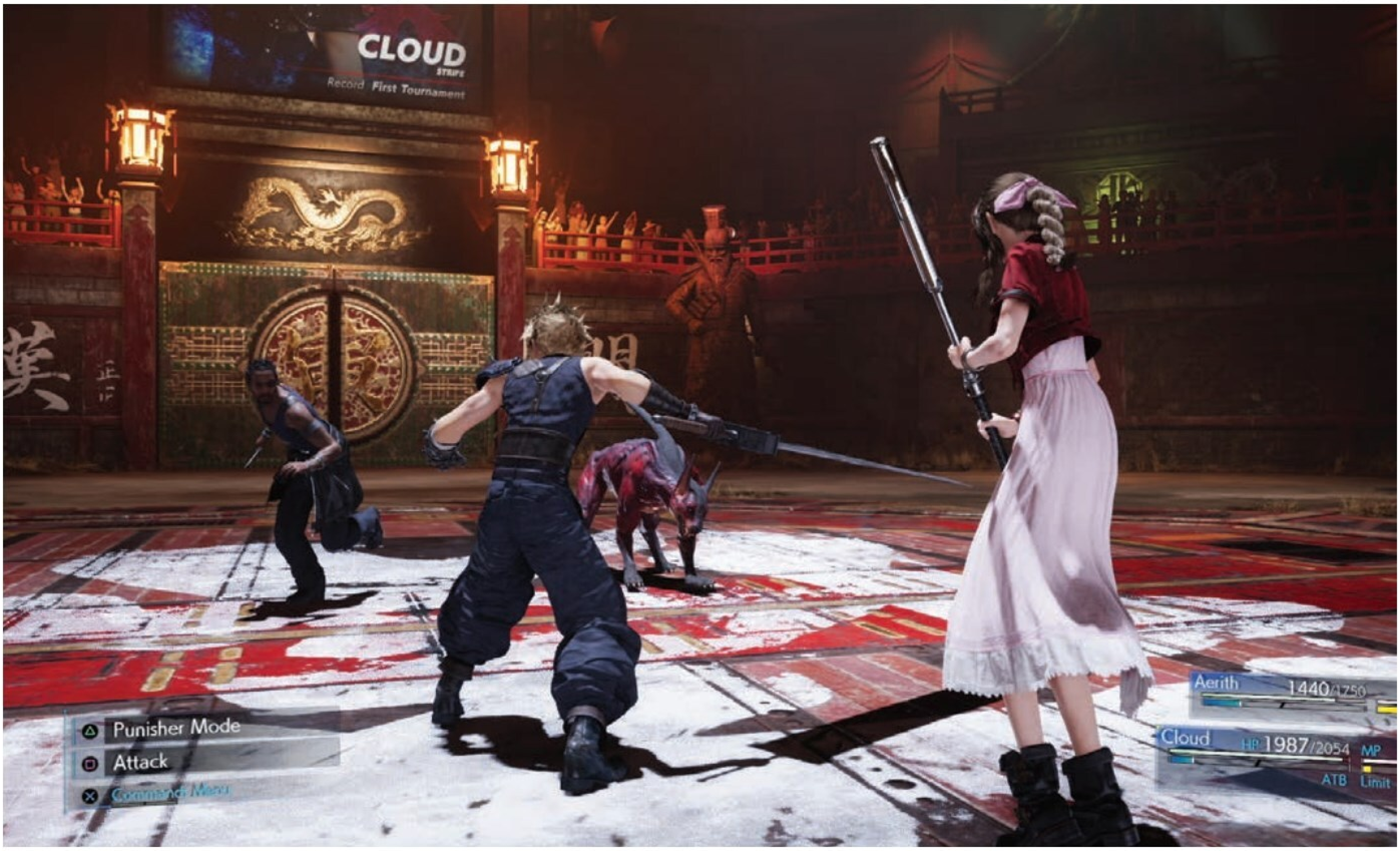
The battles that don't hit that sweet spot are aggravating, since they feel unfair rather than challenging. One downside to the action-heavy combat is that a lot is happening at any given moment, so important information can get lost in the shuffle, like what spells enemies are casting, or when offscreen foes are about to attack. The cheap hits rarely mean the difference between victory and defeat because combat is generally forgiving, but a handful of important boss fights demand more than this system can accommodate. These encounters can devolve into a tedious mess of second-by-second micromanagement, since the bosses have too much health and your control over your allies' behavior is extremely limited when you aren't controlling them directly. Even your small selection of powerful and beautiful summoned beasts (which are cool but unpredictable in their implementation) can't do much to turn the tide in situations like this. I don't mind failure when my strategy is flawed; I gladly restarted battles when I needed to optimize my setup to exploit weaknesses. But in these rare fights, Final Fantasy VII Remake loses sight of what makes its combat fun.

When battles are at their best, clever supporting mechanics encourage you to stray out of your comfort zone and explore new strategies. For example, each weapon has a special ability its wielder can use in combat, like the Blade Burst on Cloud's Mythril Saber. After activating the ability several times, the character learns how to use it without the weapon, which is an interesting way to build a repertoire of powerful techniques while also experimenting with new gear. The materia system is as cool as ever, providing lots of flexibility to try out different playstyles and obtain powerful spells. Other challenges help you dive deeper into the combat, like staggering a certain number of enemies or defeating difficult foes in simulators. Side objectives provide worthwhile rewards, and they are good diversions when you need a break from the main story.

Though the plot follows the same outline as the original Midgar section, that narrative doesn't always have the momentum to support a full game. The individual character moments are satisfying, and I enjoyed getting to know Tifa and the other members of Avalanche better. But when you zoom out, Cloud and his friends are usually just responding to what happens to them, like rescuing a kidnapped friend or escaping after falling into a trap. Shinra is undoubtedly evil, but you don't get a clear sense of a master plan from either the good or bad guys, which makes the big picture blurry. This becomes even more jarring during the surprising (even if you think you know what's coming) ending scenes. They are mildly disappointing as a resolution to this game, but much more disappointing in what they imply for any installments that lie ahead.

Regardless of what the future holds, Final Fantasy VII Remake finds an impressive equilibrium between its past and its present. Square Enix nods to the original without depending on that familiarity, crafting a distinctive world and exciting combat system that feel modern. The new approach still has rough edges, but that doesn't stop Final Fantasy VII Remake from carving out its own legacy. » **Joe Juba**





MLB The Show 20

Solid contact

8.75

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** San Diego Studios **Release** March 17 **Rating** E

PS4

» Concept
Sustain the series' good name through thoughtful additions and changes

» Graphics
The stadiums – and the lighting that makes them come alive – look fabulous

» Sound
I enjoyed most of the commentary and loved the sound made by good contact with the bat. Important instructions from your third-base coach in Road to the Show mode frustratingly aren't always delivered

» Playability
The timing meter for defensive throws is exacting but exciting. Errors caused by wonky player movements, however, are less amusing

» Entertainment
There's something for everyone here, which isn't low-key praise. It's an acknowledgement of the breadth of good work done by the developers

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Baseball in real life is often criticized for its slow pace, but I like its flow in MLB The Show 20. It's different from most other sports in that the moment-to-moment experience isn't continuous, but I enjoy the built-in tension before, during, and after crucial plays in MLB 20. The action goes from 0 to 60 with seemingly routine throws, pitches, and at-bats because the gameplay is demanding but tight. Every inning has these pressure-cooker moments that culminate in triumph or defeat.

Everyone likes a blistering home run, but one of the achievements of The Show is how it makes hits of all kinds satisfying because the outcomes are believable. Swinging the bat at pitches around and outside the strike zone with different timing and bat coverage (as indicated by the improved, customizable PCI hitting reticle based on the player) produces a range of realistic outcomes. It sucks grounding into a double play, but at least you know why it happened by the way you hit the ball.

Conversely, getting the new perfect/perfect feedback for the perfect swing timing and contact result with your bat makes you feel like you belong in the big leagues because you know you really got ahold of the ball. A perfect/perfect doesn't actually guarantee a hit, which is good. It prevents those hits from being overpowered, but still rewards a good at-bat almost all of the time.

Similar to the hitting, fielding is a demanding-but-rewarding experience. They don't call it a "routine throw to first" for nothing, but even the defensive plays you're supposed to make can go south with an errant throw if you're not careful. The tweaked zones of the throwing meter don't drastically change the timing from last year, but these and the increased reliance on your skill and the player's attributes, magnify the stakes and excitement whenever the ball is put into play.

Getting an error because I miss the timing on a throw doesn't bother me compared to the continued intermittent fielding errors. Players are sometimes immobile right before a fly ball drops, they dive or jump for a ball without a true awareness of where it actually is, and they can fail to detect balls on the ground. Players also respond sluggishly to baserunning commands, which has led to some frustrating outs.

The otherwise sturdy gameplay can also be tested in the new Showdown objectives in Diamond Dynasty mode. Here you draft players to complete a series of scenarios on the way to a face off against mini and final bosses. It replaces Moments as a source of Program stars, and I like that it's another way for solo players to play the multiplayer-focused mode.

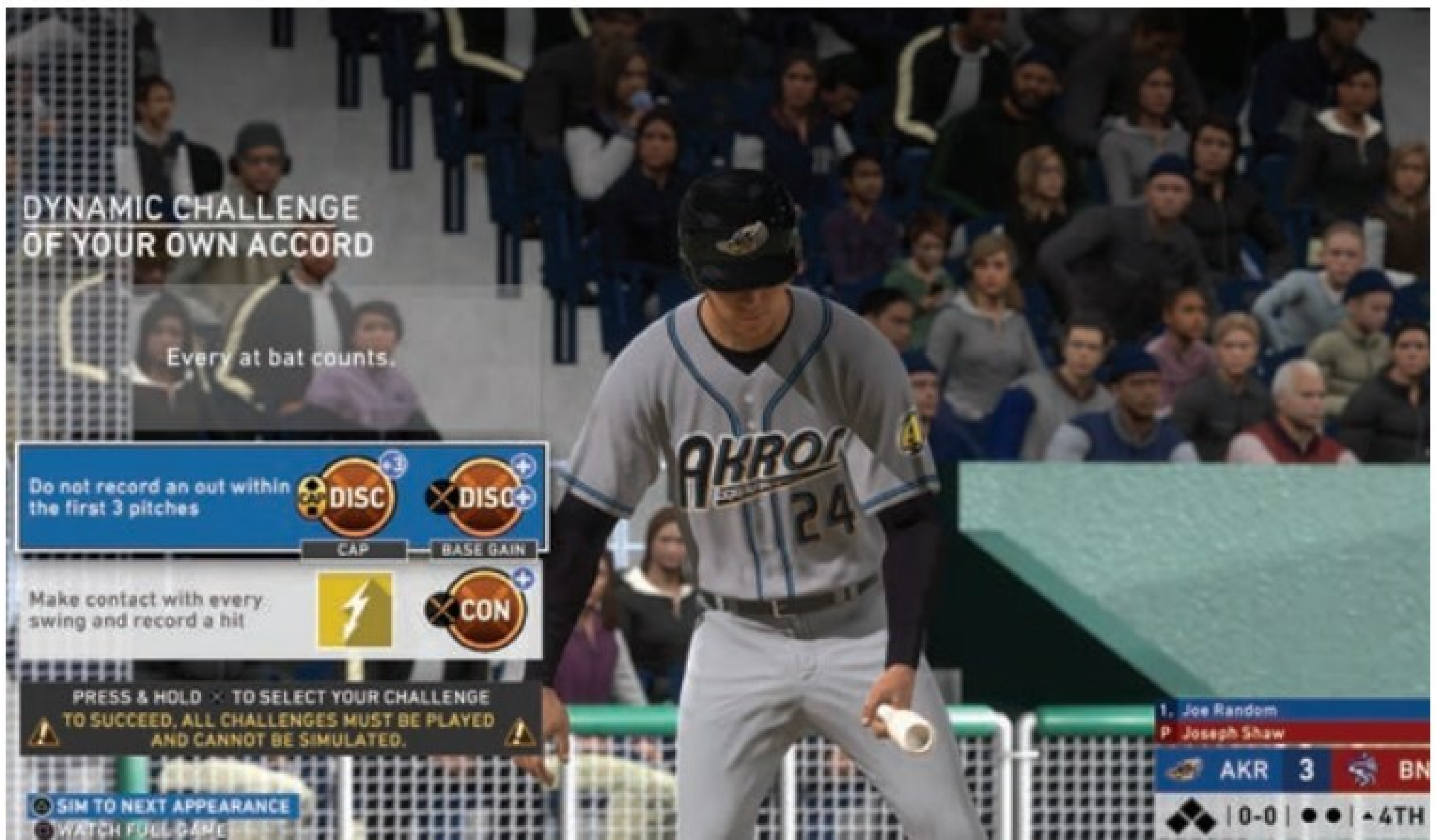
Showdowns can be challenging in a good way, but they also strain hit variety. Hits that would otherwise fall into a gap or go out of the park in the mode (and at times in the Road to the Show mode) get caught. The CPU can also deploy strong catch-up A.I. that doesn't always feel fair. It's hard to judge these perceptions when dealing with intrinsically overpowered Diamond Dynasty players or situations, for instance, but I hope future gameplay tweaking can smooth out these annoyances.

In general, MLB The Show 20's modes are strong, if not radically upgraded. Custom online leagues have been added, March to October now includes managerial trade decisions, teams can be relocated and rebranded in Franchise mode, and Road to the Show gives gameplay bonuses for teammates who work well together.

Out of the modes, Road to the Show and Franchise need to be refreshed. The former needs new situations for your player career (I don't want to change positions again!) and more interesting interactions between players beyond just progress toward perks. Meanwhile, the latter is a little dry and could use improved CPU roster management so star players don't inexplicably leave.

Of the modes, March to October is my favorite because of the way it truncates a full MLB season while still conveying a sense of what's at stake, and I like Diamond Dynasty for the variety of ways you can progress in it.

MLB The Show 20 mainly nails its core gameplay, and its many modes deliver compelling experiences. It's not the best the series could be, but it makes you hold your breath in that moment before a crucial pitch or swing of the bat – a moment I love living in. **» Matthew Kato**


DYNAMIC CHALLENGE OF YOUR OWN ACCORD

Every at bat counts.

Do not record an out within the first 3 pitches

Make contact with every swing and record a hit

PRESS & HOLD ✕ TO SELECT YOUR CHALLENGE

TO SUCCEED, ALL CHALLENGES MUST BE PLAYED AND CANNOT BE SIMULATED.

Persona 5 Royal

Revealing its true form

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Atlus **Developer** Atlus **Release** March 31 **Rating** M

When it launched in 2017, Persona 5 represented the next evolution of the Persona formula. Persona 5 Royal amplifies the stellar turn-based combat and masterful social mechanics, as well as the complex systems surrounding them. But it also adds new characters, story arcs, and a meaty post-game palace that ventures even deeper into the world's lore to deliver the definitive way to experience Persona 5.

The gameplay loop of the original remains intact: You hunt for corrupted individuals, infiltrate dungeons based on their personalities, and battle through tons of enemies – all while going to school and developing relationships with various confidants. Connecting with people from all walks of life, learning their stories, and strengthening your bonds remains rewarding from both a character development standpoint and in the way these relationships give you useful perks. If you haven't played Persona 5 before, this is the perfect way to start.

Even if you did play the original release, Royal gives you plenty of reasons to return. In addition to restructuring the way you level up your relationship with Akechi, leading to more meaningful interactions with this important character, Royal adds Kasumi and Maruki, two all-new confidants. While I like the stories of both characters, I especially love the bonuses they give along the way: Kasumi increases your HP and gives you an awesome dodge ability for when a shadow is about to ambush you, while Maruki raises Joker's maximum SP, which comes in handy during lengthy palace infiltrations.

Kasumi and Maruki offer humorous and heartfelt interactions, and while Kasumi eventually joins your party as a full-fledged Phantom Thief, that doesn't happen until the new post-game palace. While I'm disappointed she isn't in your party for the vast majority of the game, her constant presence in the story means you're already familiar with her when the time comes. That new palace and its surrounding arc serve up an interesting look at the weird way the world works following the events of the original conclusion, and offers puzzles, dungeon elements, and is unique from the other palaces in the game. I was initially worried that the addition of a new final boss battle would take away from what made the original finale special, but without spoiling it, this new end boss delivers a climactic and cinematic endcap to your journey as the Phantom Thieves.

In the 100 hours leading up to that post-game content, I loved revisiting the original palaces with their minor additions. Joker now has access to a grappling hook, which lets him swing to new points in palaces to find hidden treasure chests or the new collectible Will Seeds. Each palace's three Will Seeds are often hidden behind grappling sequences, puzzles, or difficult battles, but if you collect all three and bring the resulting item to a new character Jose in Mementos, you earn valuable accessories to equip to your characters. While they all give you powerful perks or moves, my favorite was one that buffed an ally's next magic attack to an extreme degree; I can't tell you how many times that move helped me turn the tide of battle. As you progress through the story, you also accumulate Showtime moves, team-up attacks that play out through funny, over-the-top cutscenes that also have the capacity to get you out of hot water if you're in trouble in a palace.

Revisiting the memorable battles against palace rulers is made even more fun as they now have additional forms that play off the themes of their sins. Since the palaces are based on the cognitions of the palace rulers, I loved seeing how they incorporated the bosses' transgressions and twisted views in unique ways. While each of these forms adds something exciting or compelling to the way the battles play out, one boss battle operates on a time limit, and Royal's version adds additional dialogue and a new form without adding time to the clock, leading to frustration. Regardless of that one misfire, thanks to these additions, the palace boss battles are overall better than those in the original game.

With so many additions and improvements, Persona 5 Royal is an improved version of what was already one of the best RPGs of the last decade. Whether you've been itching to enjoy the Phantom Thieves' journey again or looking to experience it for the first time, Royal wears its crown well.

» **Brian Shea**

9.25

PS4

» **Concept**
Get the Phantom Thieves back together for this director's cut of Persona 5, which includes new characters, gameplay mechanics, and areas

» **Graphics**
The visuals haven't changed from the initial release, but even three years later, Persona 5 still oozes style and visual flair

» **Sound**
One of the best soundtracks of the generation is supplemented by new tracks that diversify and strengthen the musical offerings. The new voice actors slide seamlessly into place with the already excellent cast from the original game

» **Playability**
With complex social systems and superb turn-based combat already present, Royal adds gameplay enhancements great and small

» **Entertainment**
While new characters and a new post-game palace are the biggest selling points, the tweaks and improvements make this the best way to experience one of the best RPGs in recent memory

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Animal Crossing: New Horizons

A wholesome island oasis

9

Switch

» Concept
Settle into a fledgling community, help it expand, and make animal friends along the way

» Graphics
Characters retain their overall silhouettes, while elements such as flocked fur and detailed costuming make it the best-looking entry yet. It's a faithful leap forward

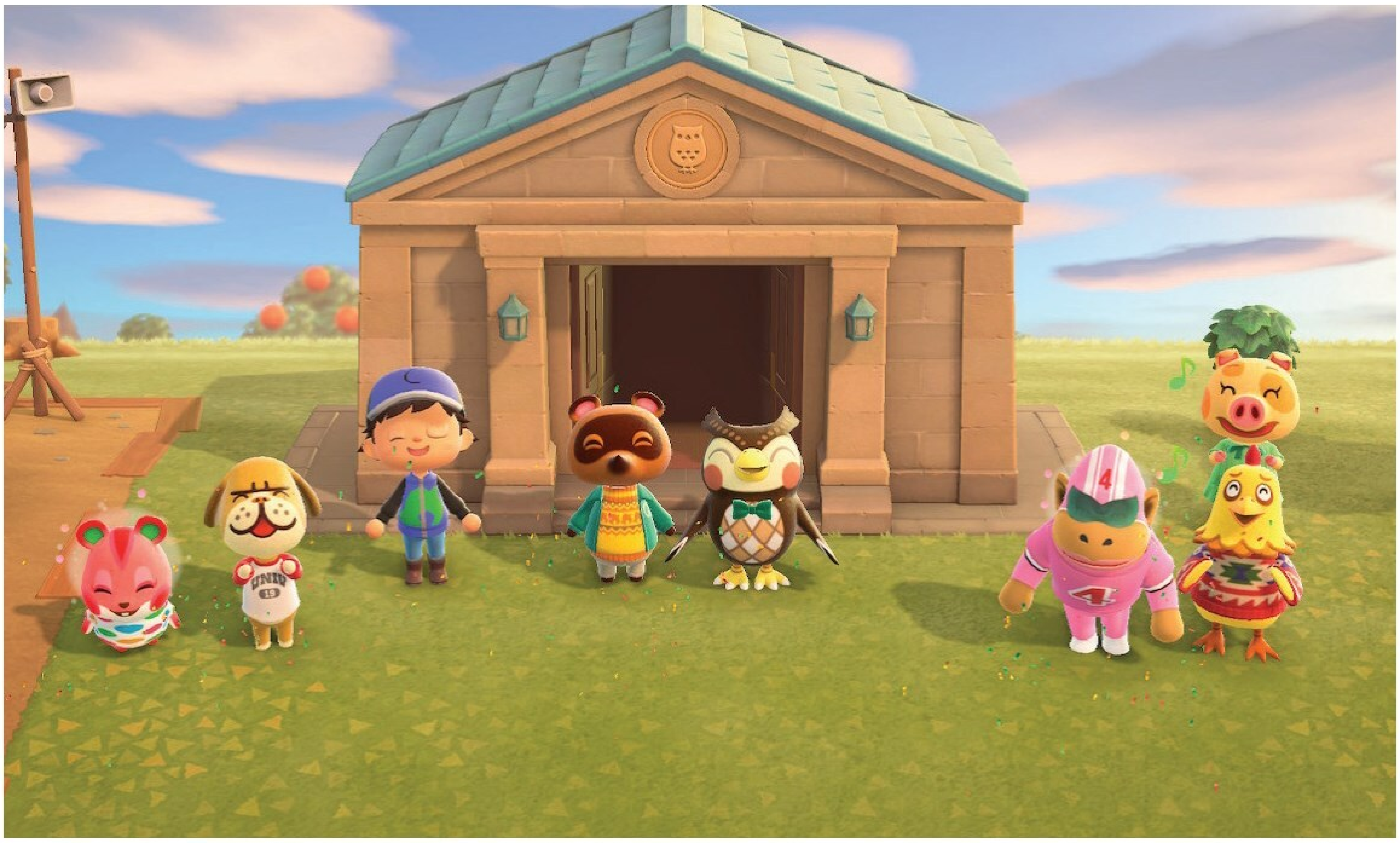
» Sound
An impressive array of easygoing (and catchy) tunes help pass the hours, while the animals' adorable chattering keeps interactions lively

» Playability
Accomplishing everything that needs to get done is easy, and decorating and rearranging your house is more user-friendly than ever

» Entertainment
A new challenge system reinvigorates the familiar core, providing a wonderful incentive to explore all of Animal Crossing's myriad activities. This cheerful life sim is the next best thing to an actual vacation

» Replay Value
High

Style 1 to 4-Player Simulation (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** March 20 **Rating** E



For nearly two decades, Animal Crossing has been an inviting little getaway for people looking to take a break from headshots and explosions. Heck, aside from the occasional wasp sting, the series is largely free of conflict; life in Animal Crossing is primarily about relaxing and living life at your own pace, all in real-time. Animal Crossing: New Horizons is an all-inclusive package that takes the best of what's come before and adds meaningful upgrades for returning visitors and curious newcomers alike. Looking for a soothing staycation in these troubled times? Welcome home.

New Horizons' early hook is that you've signed up for a Tom Nook-arranged trip to a deserted island (you're no longer visiting an established animal village). Here, you set down roots and eventually build a brand-new community of animal friends. There's a fun roughing-it together vibe throughout, which is a refreshing change of pace from being the new kid in town. The early hours almost play like a survival game, albeit one without life-or-death stakes. Even so, you're in charge of your own fate in some significant new ways. You choose where you want to put your home, and you also get to designate plots of land for the other residents and services. I liked being able to control my island's fate, especially since I had my own vision for how best to maximize the randomly generated landscape. Much of your island is likely to be off limits when you start, thanks to an abundance of rivers and cliffs. I was thrilled to get the tools to cross those areas, and even happier when I could place permanent solutions like ramps and bridges.

That sense of taking charge of your destiny is core to New Horizons. Need a fishing pole? You're going to have to fashion your own, at least early on. Foraging for materials is one of your first tasks, and you can use components like rocks and sticks at DIY tables to build tools, furniture, and other goods. Your homemade tools are adequate, but they break after a few uses. You get recipes for stronger versions before too long, but get used to watching your creations vanish in a puff of smoke. I'm torn about these fragile tools, because I like how they steer new players toward crafting. On the other hand, I grew weary of creating half a dozen fishing rods at

a time to prep for longer angling sessions. Plenty of materials are available to replace broken tools, making the problem less about scarcity and more about filling time – which is something I've never had a problem with in Animal Crossing.

Whether you like decorating your home, designing new clothes, or obsessively filling the museum with fossils, a large part of your enjoyment in those earlier games depended on how well you adjust to setting your own goals. On the flipside, if you didn't get drawn in immediately, Animal Crossing could feel pretty aimless. Tom Nook has apparently heard those complaints, too, and he's addressed them with a new Nook Miles program. Just about everything you do in the game rewards you with miles – picking fruit, talking to neighbors, visiting other players' islands, and more. These miles can be exchanged for gameplay upgrades, such as additional inventory space, a tool wheel, clothing items, or fancy props that you can place in your town to spruce it up. I love the miles program, and I appreciate how it rewards you for simply going about your ordinary day. It's all tracked via an app in your new in-game phone, which is an incredibly helpful piece of tech. I constantly referred to its Critterpedia in particular, which is a handy compendium that tracks all the bugs and fish you've collected, as well as details about when and where they show up. Considering the abundance of critters in the world, this is especially handy.

There's always been a good array of activities in Animal Crossing, and New Horizons adds a substantial amount of depth to most of them. I eagerly donated the first specimen of every critter I found to the museum, which now looks like an actual museum instead of a large, empty room. The pattern designer has more sophisticated options, allowing budding creators to design patterns for specific articles of clothing, such as a variety of shirts, sweaters, dresses, and hats. I never got into clothing design, but now that I can easily recreate my admittedly terrible wardrobe, it's a loop I'm more frequently engaging with. Eventually you can terraform the land, denoting pathways and even transforming the shape of rivers and cliffs as you see fit.

However you choose to spend your time, you're surrounded by a wholesome crew of animals who go about their simple lives. I looked forward to seeing what kind of surprises they'd bring, whether it was a fun new piece of furniture for my house or one of several dozen emotes for my villager. Don't expect any deep storytelling; that's not what Animal Crossing has ever been about. I looked forward to seeing Mac's dopey dog face in the morning, while I scurried past the pink gorilla Rocket whenever she came close because, for whatever reason, I think she's a giant weirdo.

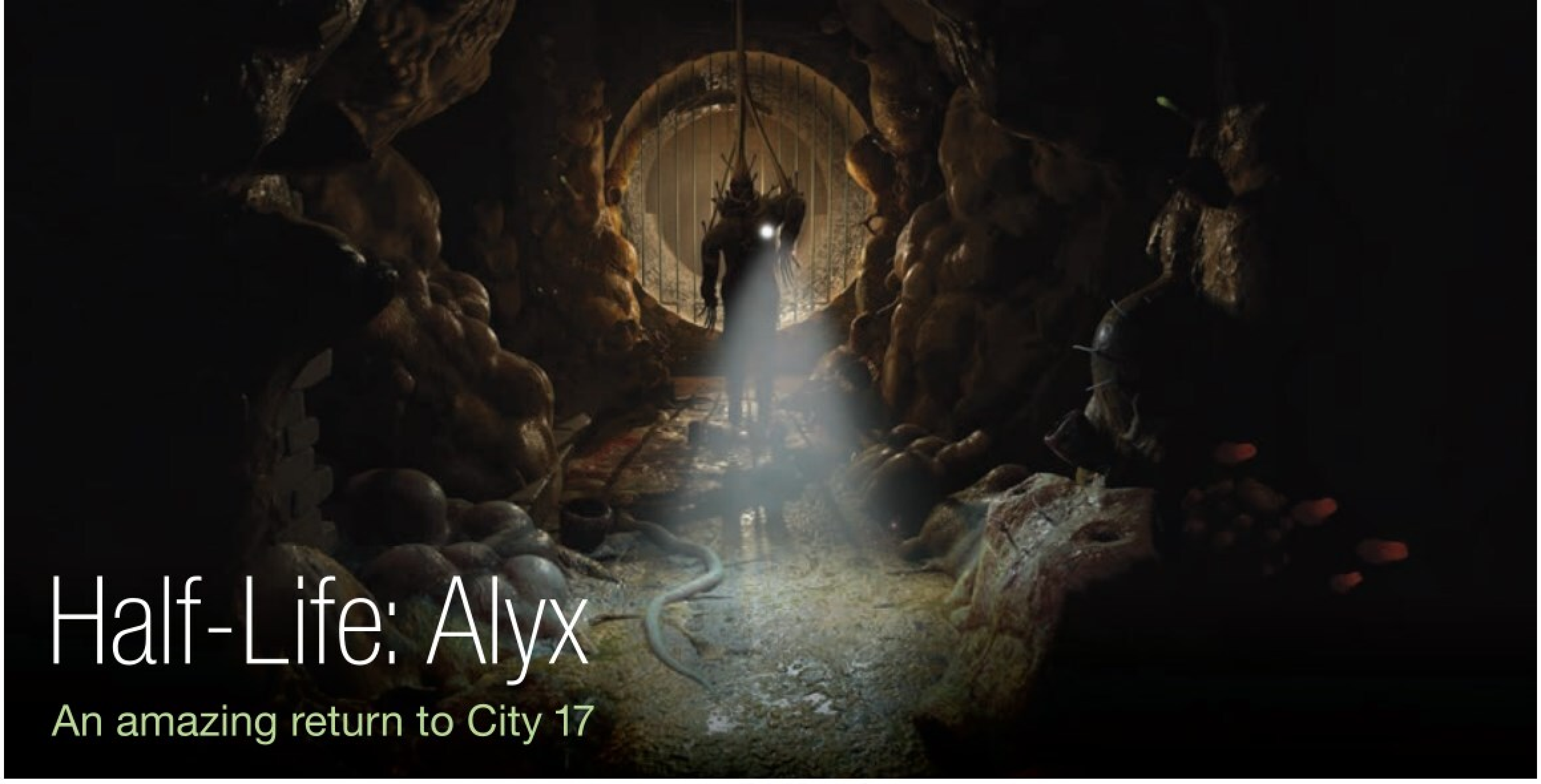
You don't only live alongside your animal neighbors. You can also play local co-op, sharing the screen with up to four players, but I wouldn't recommend it. The play space is too crowded, and only one designated player can access their inventory at any given time. It's a bummer, and my family couldn't exit the mode quickly enough. Local wireless co-op is a better option, where players can invite their friends to visit. I can see this being an attractive option for role-playing, but I was more interested in trading items and accessing things in a friend's store that weren't in my island's current rotation.

The other way to play is an Animal Crossing staple, where multiple players share an island on the same console. This continues to be a great option, and I loved sending items and letters to my family. A word of caution: If you do plan on playing this way, make sure that the first player is someone who is going to stick with it, especially in the first few weeks. Tom Nook designates that player the resident representative, and a lot of the island's progress is dependent on their participation.

New Horizons has a lot to see and do, and much of the joy comes from discovering it on your own. I still get a kick out of the real-time elements, such as how a construction project that takes a day to complete takes a real day's time to finish, or how the various merchants keep actual store hours. That little hook keeps me excited to check back in later when I end each session. Animal Crossing: New Horizons has something new to experience every day, and, best of all, it's built on a foundation of joy and earnestness that's all too rare. If the tradeoff is that I have to craft a few fishing poles, I guess it's worth it in the end. » **Jeff Cork**

Review In Progress

Animal Crossing: New Horizons is designed to be played over a long period of time, with certain items and events available at different times of the year. This review is based on playing the game daily over several weeks. That's enough to evaluate the basic progression and mechanics, but questions remain about series staples like seasonal changes and special festivals around real holidays. To address the natural evolution of New Horizons throughout the year, we're planning on updating this review several times, evaluating the new content and revisiting the score if appropriate.



Half-Life: Alyx

An amazing return to City 17

9

Valve Index • HTC Vive
Oculus Touch

» Concept
Deepen the world of Half-Life with an astonishingly detailed VR shooter set between the first and second games

» Graphics
Gorgeous environments and eerily detailed enemies litter your journey through City 17

» Sound
Everything from tiny water drips to massive set-piece moments are realistic and inescapable with rich audio

» Playability
Intuitive weapons and gadgets set a new benchmark for VR controls

» Entertainment
The dense campaign never lets up with surprising reveals, new enemies, and witty dialogue to carry you through the exciting journey

» Replay Value
Moderately low

Style 1-Player Shooter **Publisher** Valve **Developer** Valve **Release** March 23 **Rating** M

The Half-Life series possesses a combination of historical significance and fan enthusiasm that few other franchises can match. With that kind of tradition and audience, Valve releasing its long-awaited continuation as a VR exclusive is controversial. However, the moment Half-Life: Alyx's intro text faded and I opened my eyes to a Combine-infested Earth, I was convinced. The phenomenal atmosphere of City 17 is apparent from the moment you see a towering three-legged Strider knock debris loose as it ascends a building, and that feeling of awe continues all the way to the jaw-dropping finish. Centered on Alyx Vance, a main character from the series made playable for the first time, Half-Life: Alyx is an unforgettable adventure that undeniably pushes VR forward.

The gameplay is equal parts shooter and puzzler, encouraging immersive exploration of the beautifully realized environments. These components are enhanced by the VR control scheme, which feels tight throughout and only becomes more natural as you play. The story (which is set between the events of Half-Life and Half-Life 2) finds Alyx on a journey to rescue her father from Combine captivity; you don't need to be a fan of the series to appreciate the narrative, but diehard fans have their patience rewarded.

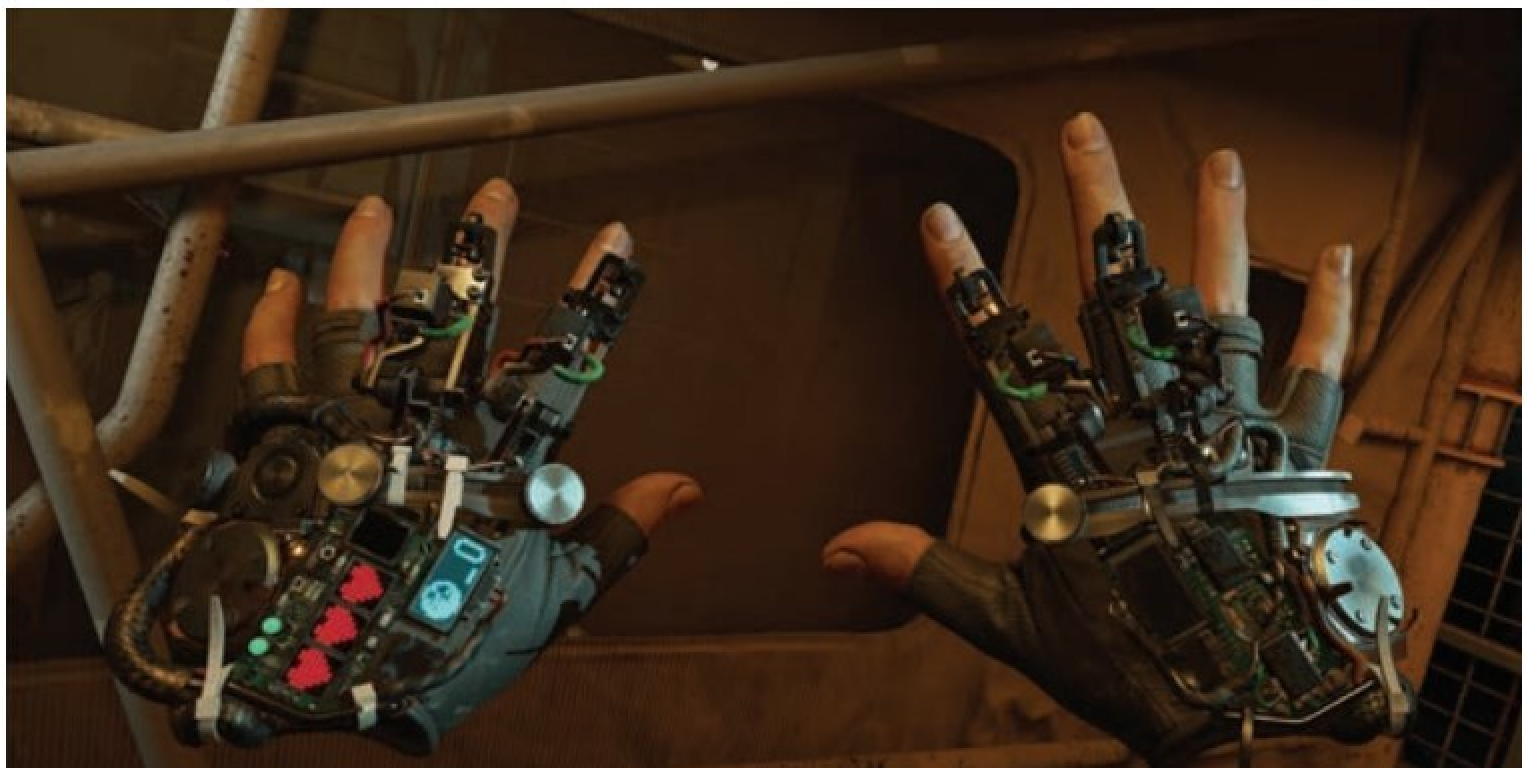
Half-Life's stark world has never felt so alive as it does here. Whether you're marveling at the disgustingly realistic viscera on corpses in the sewers or counting the teeth on the ceiling Barnacles waiting to suck up passersby, the gorgeous setting is immersive. I watched for nearly a minute as a headcrab scrambled over a pile of luggage to get at me, pulling bags down and falling on its back in an unscripted display of the game's impressive physics. Intricately detailed faces follow you through conversations, and gorgeous vistas take your breath away. Seeing Half-Life staples rendered with modern technology, explorable in virtual reality, is truly stunning. Experiencing it with this level of closeness and interactivity gives me a new appreciation for the series' specific brand of dystopian future.

Controlling Alyx feels great thanks to the gravity gloves that help you manipulate the debris in your environment. If you see a chunk of Resin (the currency used for weapon upgrades), you simply reach out and flick your wrist back. This sends it flying toward you, and then you grip to catch it when it reaches you. This never stops feeling satisfying, and using it in conjunction with other actions, like storing ammo over my shoulder and managing more complicated weapon reloads, feels instantly intuitive and fun to master. By the end, I was using my hands independently like a pro, unless any enemy got the jump on me and my panicked movements had me pulling the trigger on an empty gun and scrambling back for some breathing room.

The gravity gloves are technically called R.U.S.S.E.L.S. – named for Resistance techie Russel, a lighthearted voice in your ear who guides you through City 17 in pursuit of Alyx's father. Every time he chimed in on my earpiece was a welcome relief from the oppressive surroundings. Despite its status as a prequel, the campaign ventures into new territory for the franchise and pushes it forward in compelling ways. From a story perspective, Half-Life: Alyx is an enjoyable and essential entry in the series.

Puzzles litter the world, with some that are necessary for progression and others that unlock optional caches of extra ammo or health. One puzzle type requires you to guide electricity from circuit to circuit by pointing your multitool around a room to illuminate the maze, which is a fun way to explore the environment. However, other puzzle types quickly wear out their welcome, including guiding one point to another along a globe while avoiding Tron-like red lines, or remembering pairs of colors and matching them after they disappear. Some of these are repeated so often that I would sometimes skip the optional loot just to avoid going through the motions yet again.

Half Life: Alyx is a must-play game worthy of the series' legacy. Despite some puzzles and encounters that feel like filler, the overall experience is strong. The stunning setpieces, beautiful world, and smart writing stand out no matter the medium, and mark a return to form for Valve. If you were waiting for a killer app before you made the investment into virtual reality, this is it. » **Leo Vader**



The Room VR: A Dark Matter

An atmospheric powerhouse

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Fireproof Games **Developer** Fireproof Games **Release** March 26 **Rating** M

8.5

PC

» **Concept**
Explore a series of supernatural incidents by solving a variety of puzzles, but only if you prevent an otherworldly entity from driving you insane

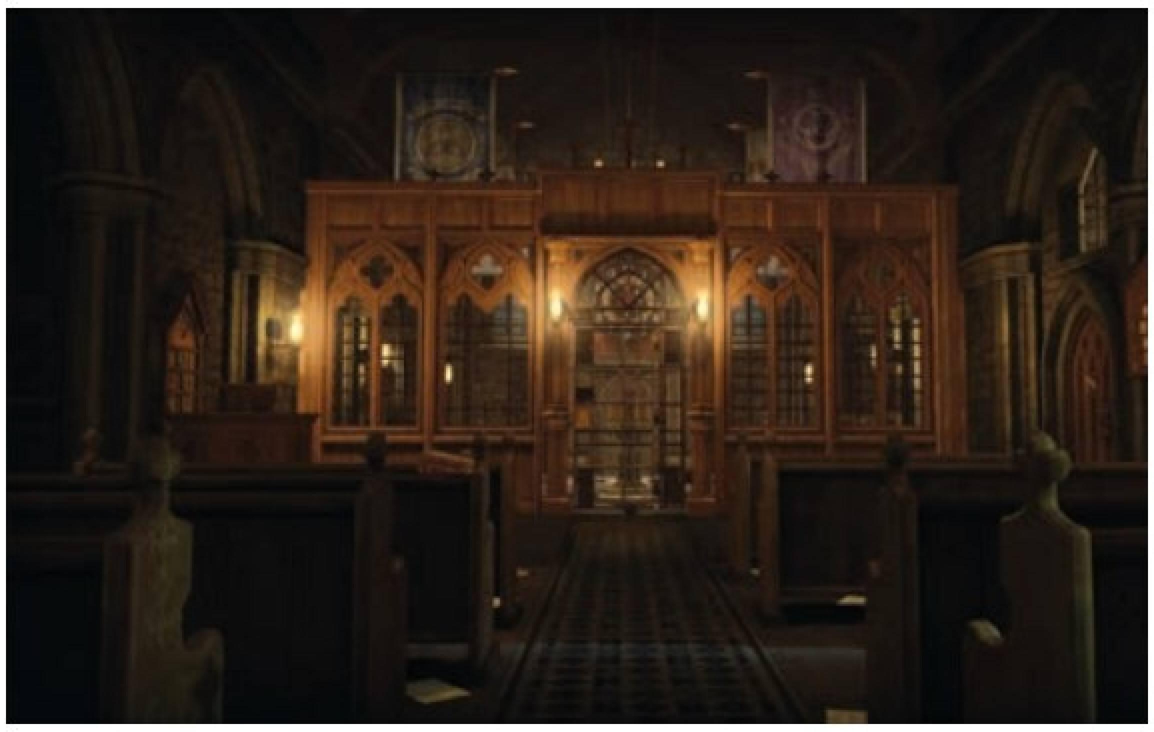
» **Graphics**
The eerie environments are even spookier than the mobile games thanks to VR, but some objects stand out for their lack of detail

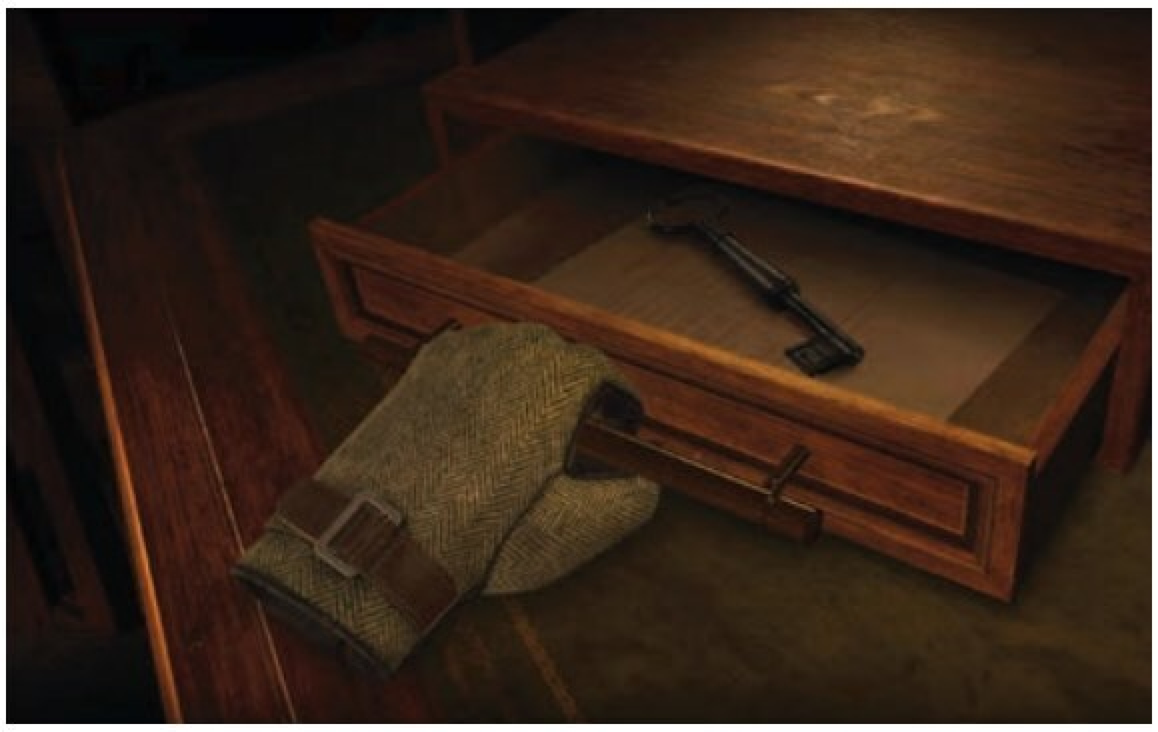
» **Sound**
A subtle-but-effective soundtrack set the hairs on the back of my neck on edge

» **Playability**
In VR, you can physically reach out and manipulate most of the objects in the environment. Determining which tools to use on each object is usually straightforward

» **Entertainment**
A Dark Matter's simple puzzles are a nice diversion, and exploring Fireproof's creepy world is thrilling

» **Replay Value**
Moderate





In 2012, a group of ex-Criterion developers who had worked on the Burnout series formed Fireproof Games. They released The Room, a moody puzzler that had players manipulating a virtual puzzle box with a nearly endless supply of hidden compartments. The Room was a mobile hit and spawned several sequels that took full advantage of mobile's touch interface. With A Dark Matter, Fireproof takes its series into the bold new world of virtual reality, and the series' puzzle mechanics translate perfectly to this medium.

Despite a name implying otherwise, The Room games have grown far beyond a single room. During your journey in A Dark Matter, you visit the storehouses of an Egyptian museum, a desolate cathedral, and a witch's hovel. In each area, you discover strange contraptions and puzzle boxes, all of which you can physically manipulate in a variety of ways. The VR controls are intuitive and approachable since you can simply reach out and grab things with touch controllers, and I loved working out how each machine operated with my bare hands. After tinkering with a series of pullies, I lifted the lid off a sarcophagus and staggered back in delight and horror. In another area, I matched the symbols in a spell book and added ingredients to a boiling cauldron, then watched in wonder as the pot summoned forth a magic mirror.

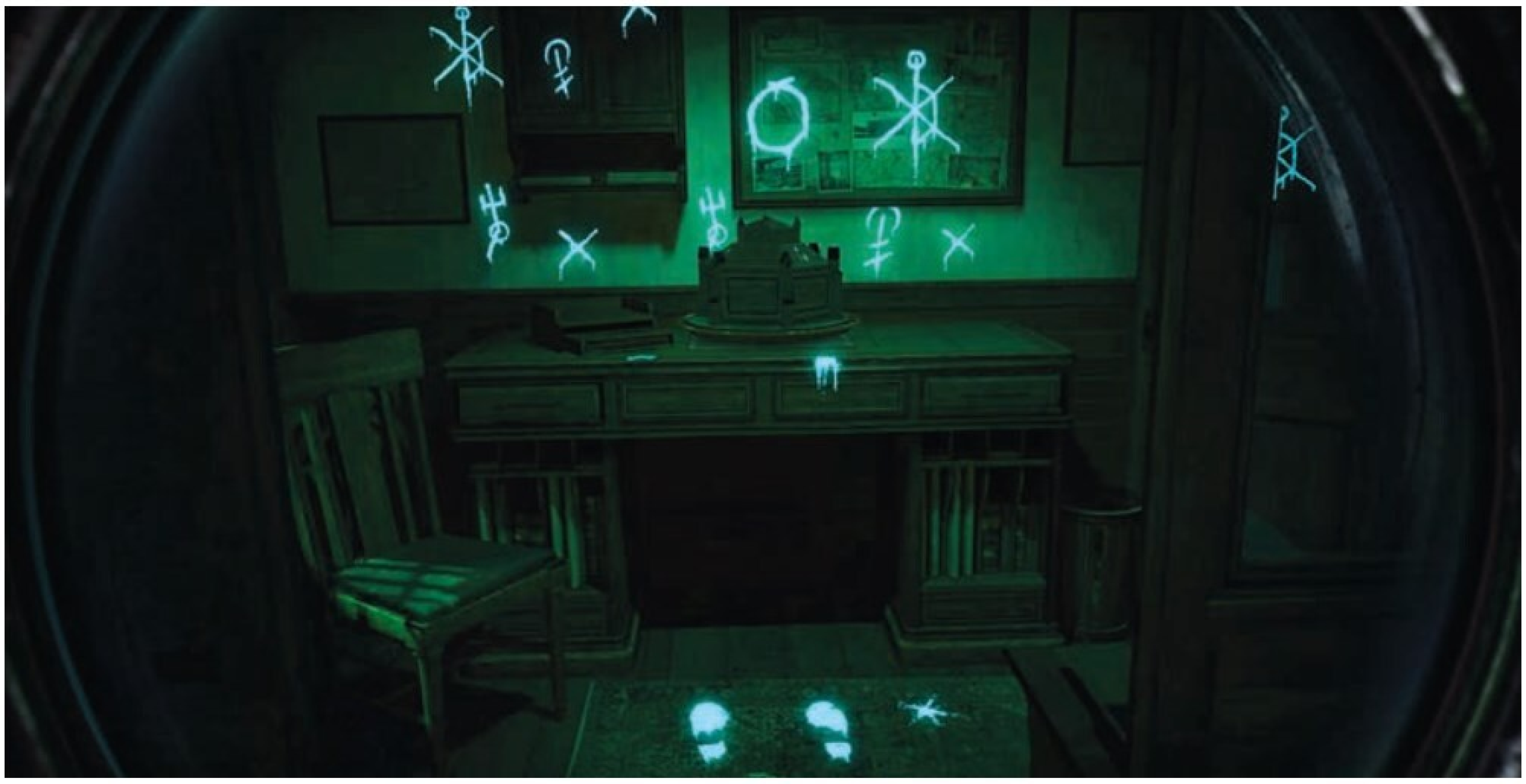
A Dark Matter's puzzles are full of supernatural spectacle, but the underlying logic is easy to follow. However, knowing exactly where to go next can be challenging, because you can easily overlook interactive objects if you're not careful. Fortunately, Fireproof's hint system is only a button press away. I called on these hints to nudge me in the right direction a handful of times, but I never felt like they ruined the puzzle solutions. However, successive hints do spell out exactly what you need to do if you get completely stuck.

At the beginning of A Dark Matter, players assume the role of a police inspector tasked with investigating a number of missing persons cases spread across Victorian England. However, as you dive deeper into these cases, you uncover a supernatural plot that involves a Cthulhu-like entity and an ancient Egyptian burial ground. This story doesn't go much deeper than the initial interesting premise, and it leaves you with some disappointingly unresolved mysteries, but I still enjoyed the ride.

What A Dark Matter lacks in plot development, it makes up for in atmosphere. Even when playing The Room games on my iPad, I would occasionally feel the need to look over my shoulder. A Dark Matter takes the series' ghostly environments to a whole new level. It isn't a traditional horror game; you don't have to worry about getting attacked by monsters, but the atmosphere is unnerving. During several moments, I couldn't shake the feeling that someone else was watching me. I even hesitated to move down a darkened hall because I wasn't ready to face the unknown. A lot of this enhanced atmosphere is due to the inherent immersion provided by VR, but A Dark Matter's atmosphere is also incredibly affecting and exhilarating in its own right, and almost worth the price of admission alone.

I always make time to play new installments of The Room on mobile, so I was curious to see how well that formula translates to virtual reality. Thankfully, it is a perfect fit for VR, and the series' barebone narrative makes this is a great chance for newcomers to jump onboard. The puzzle-box gameplay is great for VR, and Fireproof's moody environments should delight fans of atmospheric horror. In some ways, A Dark Matter is the culmination of everything Fireproof has done on mobile, but I also hope that it is a new beginning for the series in VR.

» **Ben Reeves**



7.25 A Fold Apart

Platform Switch • PC • iOS
Release April 17 **Rating** E

The concept is novel, and I like having a story with some emotional pull, but it never moves beyond that. I can't think of a puzzle that stood out over the others, or even a moment in the story that was particularly poignant. It all just comes together in a presentable package. **– Kimberley Wallace**

6.25 In Other Waters

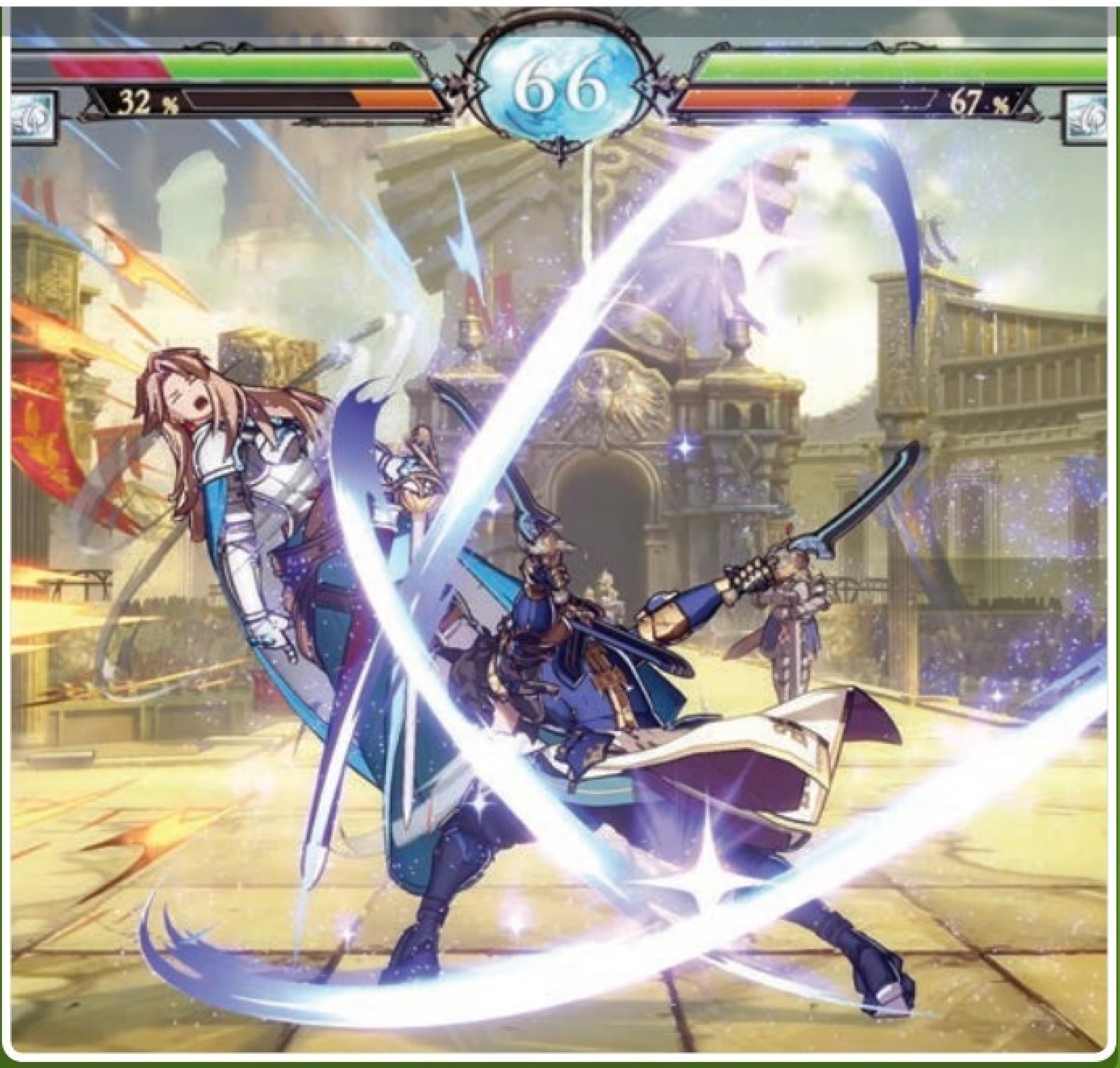
Platform Switch • PC • Mac **Release** April 3 **Rating** E

In Other Waters' gameplay and story aren't enough to fuel the exploration it demands, but its world building is commendable. Unfortunately, this makes it suited more toward amateur biologists and cartographers than those looking for a gripping adventure. **– Matthew Kato**

7.75 Granblue Fantasy: Versus

Platform PS4 • PC **Release** March 13 **Rating** T

Granblue Fantasy: Versus is a respectable starting point for the series' entry into the fighting genre. I applaud it for breaking down some barriers that newcomers have getting into fighting games and incorporating RPG mechanics into its combat. Granblue Fantasy: Versus might not reinvent the wheel, but there's also something to be said about an approachable fighting game that doesn't bog you down with overly complex inputs. **– Kimberley Wallace**



reviews archive

STADIA		
Darksiders Genesis	6.5	322

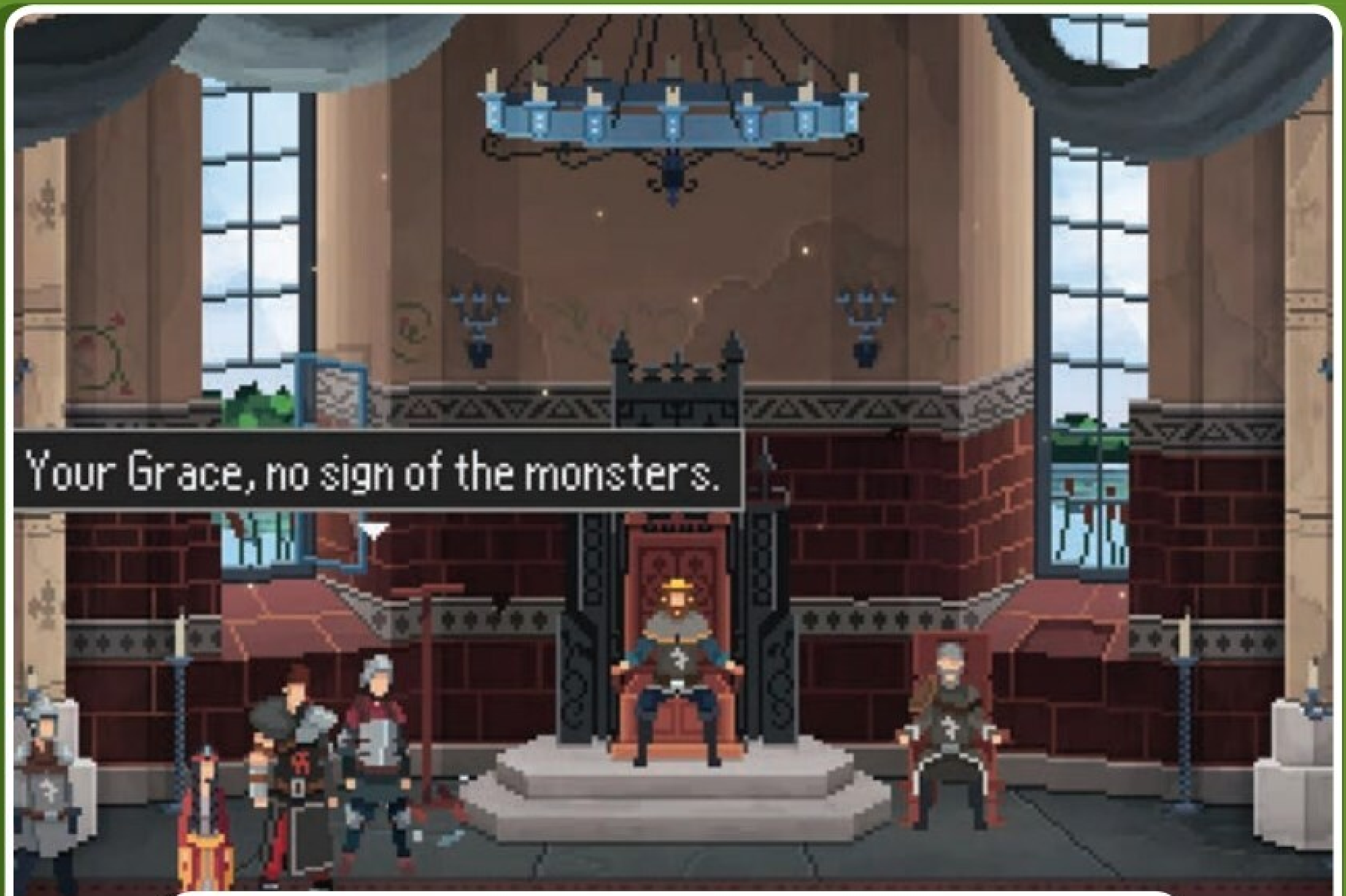
PS4		
7th Sector	7.5	324
Afterparty	7.75	320
AO Tennis 2	6.5	324
Arise	8.75	322
Bloodroots	8.5	324
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare	8.75	320
Coffee Talk	7.5	324
Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance Tactics, The	6.25	324
Destiny 2: Shadowkeep	9	320
Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot	8	323
Journey to the Savage Planet	8	323
Kentucky Route Zero	8.5	323
Kingdom Hearts III Re Mind	6.5	323
Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III, The	8	320
Life is Strange 2	8.5	322
Lonely Mountains: Downhill	8.75	321
Need for Speed Heat	8	321
Nioh 2	8.5	324
Outer Worlds, The	9.25	320
Plants vs. Zombies: Battle for Neighborville	7.75	321
SaGa Scarlet Grace: Ambitions	7.75	323
Shenmue III	6	322
Shovel Knight Showdown	7.5	322
Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order	8.75	321
Surge 2, The	8.5	320
Tony Stewart's Sprint Car Racing	7	324
Wattam	7.25	322
Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair	8.5	320

XBOX ONE		
7th Sector	7.5	324
Afterparty	7.75	320
AO Tennis 2	6.5	324
Arise	8.75	322
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare	8.75	320
Coffee Talk	7.5	324
Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance Tactics, The	6.25	324
Destiny 2: Shadowkeep	9	320
Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot	8	323
Grid	7	320
Indivisible	7	320
Journey to the Savage Planet	8	323
Kentucky Route Zero	8.5	323
Kingdom Hearts III Re Mind	6.5	323
Life is Strange 2	8.5	322
Lonely Mountains: Downhill	8.75	321
Need for Speed Heat	8	321
Ori and the Will of the Wisps	9.5	324
Outer Worlds, The	9.25	320
Plants vs. Zombies: Battle for Neighborville	7.75	321
SaGa Scarlet Grace: Ambitions	7.75	323
Shenmue III	6	322
Shovel Knight Showdown	7.5	322
Sojourn, The	6.5	320
Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order	8.75	321
Surge 2, The	8.5	320
Tony Stewart's Sprint Car Racing	7	324
Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair	8.5	320

SWITCH		
AO Tennis 2	6.5	324
Bloodroots	8.5	324
Daemon X Machina	5.5	320
Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance Tactics, The	6.25	324
Kentucky Route Zero	8.5	323
Kunai	6	324
Luigi's Mansion 3	8.5	320
Neo Cab	8	320
Pokémon Sword & Shield	8.75	321
SaGa Scarlet Grace: Ambitions	7.75	323
Sayonara Wild Hearts	7	320
Shovel Knight Showdown	7.5	322
To The Moon	8.25	323
Untitled Goose Game	7.5	320
Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair	8.5	320

PC		
7th Sector	7.5	324
Afterparty	7.75	320
AO Tennis 2	6.5	324
Arise	8.75	322
Bloodroots	8.5	324
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare	8.75	320
Code Vein	6.5	320
Coffee Talk	7.5	324
Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance Tactics, The	6.25	324
Darksiders Genesis	6.5	322
Destiny 2: Shadowkeep	9	320
Disco Elysium	9	321
Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot	8	323
FIFA 20	7.5	320
Ghost Recon Breakpoint	6	320
Grid	7	320
Indivisible	7	320
John Wick Hex	8	320
Journey to the Savage Planet	8	323
Kentucky Route Zero	8.5	323
Kunai	6	324
Legends of Runeterra	8.25	324
Life is Strange 2	8.5	322
Lonely Mountains: Downhill	8.75	321
Luna: The Shadow Dust	7.5	324
Magic: The Gathering Arena	8.75	320
Mosaic	8.75	322
Need for Speed Heat	8	321
Neo Cab	8	320
Ori and the Will of the Wisps	9.5	324
Outer Worlds, The	9.25	320
Planet Zoo	7	321
Plants vs. Zombies: Battle for Neighborville	7.75	321
SaGa Scarlet Grace: Ambitions	7.75	323
Shenmue III	6	322
Shovel Knight Showdown	7.5	322
Sojourn, The	6.5	320
Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order	8.75	321
Surge 2, The	8.5	320
Tony Stewart's Sprint Car Racing	7	324
Untitled Goose Game	7.5	320
Warcraft III Reforged	6	324
Wattam	7.25	322
Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair	8.5	320

iOS		
Lego Builder's Journey	7.5	323
Mosaic	8.75	322
Neo Cab	8	320
SaGa Scarlet Grace: Ambitions	7.75	323
Sayonara Wild Hearts	7	320



7.75 Yes, Your Grace

Platform PC **Release** March 6 **Rating** NR

I admire that the choices aren't black-and-white, and I have fond memories of the king and his daughters, especially of the youngest and her quest for the perfect pet. But Yes, Your Grace requires too much hindsight and replaying through content to see better outcomes, which is more repetitive than eye-opening. – Kimberley Wallace

Visit gameinformer.com
for the full reviews

Our next issue launches digitally on 05/26
with the print issue to follow

gameinformer Volume XXX ○ Number 4 ○ Issue 325

STAFF

Head of Game Informer
Jim Edgett jimedgett@gameinformer.com

Editor-in-Chief
Andy McNamara andy@gameinformer.com

Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com

Senior Reviews Editor
Joe Juba joe@gameinformer.com

Senior Previews Editor
Matt Miller miller@gameinformer.com

Features Editor
Kimberley Wallace kim@gameinformer.com

PC Editor
Daniel Tack daniel@gameinformer.com

Digital Editor
Brian Shea brianshea@gameinformer.com

Senior Editors
Matthew Kato kato@gameinformer.com
Jeff Cork jeff@gameinformer.com
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com

Video Producer
Leo Vader leovader@gameinformer.com

Video Editor
Alex Stadnik alexstadnik@gameinformer.com

Creative Director
Jeff Akervik jeffakervik@gameinformer.com

Senior Production Director
Curtis Fung curtis@gameinformer.com

Senior Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin Tobin laleh@gameinformer.com

Graphic Designer
Jen Vinson jenifervinson@gameinformer.com

Web Designers/Programmers
Margaret Andrews margaretandrews@gameinformer.com
Kristin Williams kristinwilliams@gameinformer.com

Circulation Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinformer.com

Office Manager
Sarah Hansen sarah@gameinformer.com

Director of Content Strategy
Tiffany Tennison tiffanytennison@gameinformer.com

Senior Video Producer
Erik Conway erikconway@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Advertising Manager
Janey Stringer janey@gameinformer.com

Marketing Coordinator
Rachel Castle rachel@gameinformer.com

National Ad Sales
Zach Hovland zachhovland@gameinformer.com

Partner Sales
Gino Carlomagno ginocarlomagno@gameinformer.com

CUSTOMER SERVICE

For renewal, address change and Power Up Rewards Pro details:

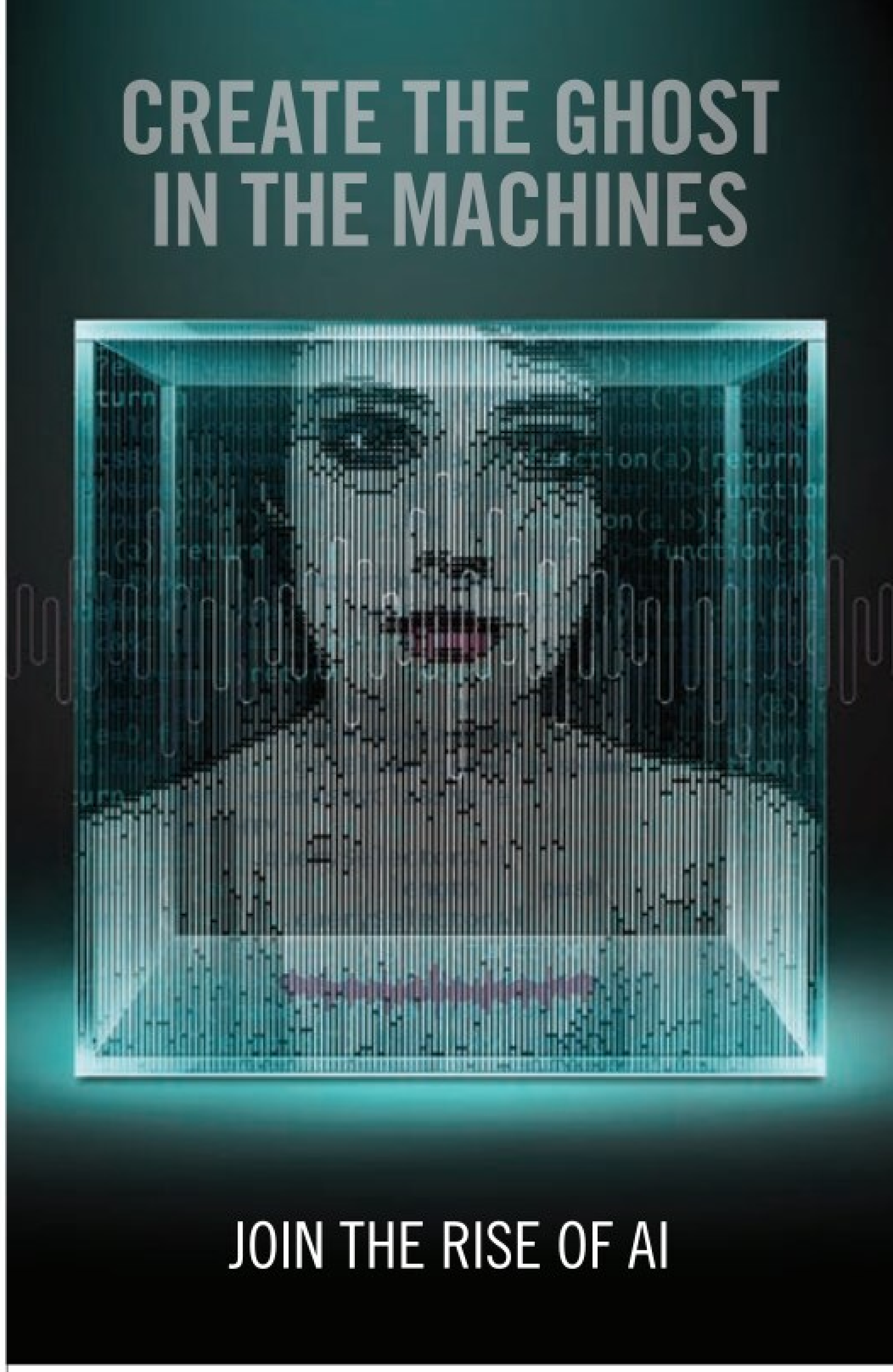
Visit: **www.gameinformer.com**
Email: **customerservice@gameinformer.com**
or send correspondence to:

724 North First St., 3rd Floor
Minneapolis, MN 55401 • Attn: CIS Dept

For subscription inquiry ONLY:
1 (866) 844-GAME (4263)

Manufactured and printed in the United States of America. The Editor welcomes company product information for all video games. Such materials should be addressed to: Editor, Game Informer® Magazine, 724 North First St., 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Copyright in all screenshots contained within this publication are owned by their respective companies. Products named in these pages are trade names, or trademarks, of their respective companies. All rights reserved; reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Game Informer® is a trademark of GameStop. PUBLISHER LIABILITY FOR ERROR The publisher shall not be liable for slight changes or typographical errors that do not lessen the value of an advertisement. The publisher's liability for other errors or omissions in connection with an advertisement is limited to republication of the advertisement in any subsequent issue or the refund of any monies paid for the advertisement. INDEMNIFICATION The advertiser and/or Advertising Agency agrees to defend and indemnify the publisher against any and all liability, loss, or expense arising from claims of libel, unfair competition, unfair trade practices, infringement of trademarks, copyrights, trade names, patents, or proprietary rights or violation of rights of privacy, resulting from the publication of the Advertiser's statement

Alliance for Audited Media
The New Audit Bureau of Circulations


CREATE THE GHOST IN THE MACHINES

JOIN THE RISE OF AI

MAJORS OFFERED:

SOFTWARE ENGINEERING
ADVANCING COMPUTER SCIENCE
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE
DATA SCIENCE
SOFTWARE ENGINEERING (MS)

GAME STUDIES
GAME ART AND ANIMATION
GAME DESIGN
GAME PRODUCTION AND MANAGEMENT (MS)
GAME PROGRAMMING

BUSINESS & INNOVATION
BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY
TECHNOLOGY INNOVATION (MS)
TECHNOLOGY LEADERSHIP (MS)

CREATION & SIMULATION
DIGITAL MAKER & FABRICATION
HUMAN COMPUTER INTERACTION
ROBOTICS AND EMBEDDED SYSTEMS
VIRTUAL REALITY

CYBER SECURITY
CYBER SECURITY (MS)
NETWORK ENGINEERING
NETWORK SECURITY
TECHNOLOGY FORENSICS

DIGITAL ARTS
ADVERTISING ART
DIGITAL MARKETING
DIGITAL VIDEO

University of Advancing Technology
UAT
Learn. Experience. Innovate.

uat.edu/ghost

Brain Games

A spectrum of video game trivia to test your general knowledge

by Ben Reeves

1. Fallout 2 has an arguably unnecessary subtitle. What is it?
A. Back To The Wasteland
B. A Post Nuclear Role-Playing Game
C. Prepare For The Future
D. New Vegas

2. The original Super Mario Bros. celebrates its 35th birthday this year. During what month did it first release in Japan?
A. November
B. October
C. April
D. September

3. How many years did Minecraft spend in beta before its official release?
A. Three
B. Four
C. Two
D. Time is relative, man

4. DotA helped spawn the MOBA genre, but it began as a mod for what popular PC game?
A. Half-Life 2
B. Arma 2
C. Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos
D. The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

5. Nintendo's N64 was originally going to be called the Ultra 64, but before that it went by what codename?
A. Cafe
B. Revolution
C. Project Reality
D. Don't Blow This, Guys

6. Which game was not part of Sony's PS3 launch lineup?
A. Genji: Days of the Blade
B. Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2
C. Resistance: Fall of Man
D. Riiiidge Racer 7

7. In what year does the single-player campaign for Call of Duty: Black Ops III take place?
A. 2012
B. 2065
C. 1989
D. Uhh, the near future?

8. Sega originally explored other animal designs for Sonic before landing on a hedgehog. In some other reality he's called Sonic the …
A. Rabbit
B. Cat
C. Raccoon
D. Sasquatch

9. What is not one of the five boroughs in Liberty City as featured in the Grand Theft Auto series?
A. Broker
B. Algonquin
C. Bohan
D. Rotterdam

10. In 1996, what cereal brand released a non-violent mod to the popular shooter Doom?
A. Chex
B. Trix
C. Cheerios
D. Crunchy Loggs

Answer Key: 1. B, 2. D, 3. A or D, 4. C, 5. C, 6. B, 7. B, 8. A, 9. D, 10. A

Game Informer Magazine® (ISSN: 1067-6392) is published ten times per year, at a subscription price of $14.98, by Sunrise Publications®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. Business, Editorial Offices, Accounting and Circulation Offices: 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. To subscribe, order back issues, or customer service inquiries call (612) 486-6100. Canada & Mexico orders must add $25/year additional postage. All orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars by check, money order, or credit card. PowerUp Rewards™ Pro Card may be purchased for $12.00 (includes $7.00 S&H). Periodicals postage paid at Minneapolis, MN and additional mailing offices. SUBSCRIBERS/POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Game Informer Magazine®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS.

HYPERX™ | WE'RE ALL GAMERS

JUJU SMITH-SCHUSTER

HYPERX CLOUDX™/CLOUD

WIRED GAMING HEADSET

$69.99 each

Designed for XBOX
Official Licensed Product

- OFFICIAL LICENSED HEADSET
- SIGNATURE HYPERX COMFORT
- DURABLE ALUMINUM FRAME
- IN-LINE AUDIO CONTROL
- 53MM DRIVERS FOR IMMERSIVE SOUND
- DETACHABLE NOISE-CANCELLATION MICROPHONE

AMERICA'S #1 SELLING PC GAMING HEADSET BRAND* npd

CLOUDX STINGER CORE

$39.99

- IMMERSIVE IN-GAME AUDIO
- IN-LINE AUDIO CONTROLS WITH MIC MUTE
- PADDED HEADBAND

Designed for XBOX

CLOUD STINGER CORE

$39.99

- IMMERSIVE IN-GAME AUDIO
- IN-LINE AUDIO CONTROLS WITH MIC MUTE
- PADDED HEADBAND

WORKS WITH PS4™ PC Nintendo Switch™

CLOUD ALPHA

$99.99

- 50MM DUAL CHAMBER DRIVERS
- SIGNATURE HYPERX COMFORT
- DETACHABLE BRAIDED CABLE

WORKS WITH PC Xbox One™ PS4™ Nintendo Switch™

CLOUD STINGER

$49.99

- 90-DEGREE ROTATING EAR CUPS
- 50MM DIRECTIONAL DRIVERS
- FLIP-TO-MUTE NOISE-CANCELLING MIC

WORKS WITH PC Xbox One™ PS4™ Nintendo Switch™

*NPD source data: The NPG Group, Inc., U.S. Retail Tracking Service, PC Headset / PC Microphone, Gaming Designed, Jan. 2018-Dec. 2019.

HyperX is a division of Kingston. ©2020 Kingston Technology Corporation 17600 Newhope Street, Fountain Valley, CA 92708 USA. All rights reserved. All trademarks and registered trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

US $5.99 | EUR €5.99 | UK £3.99

7 20150 37181 1

Issue 325

www.gameinformer.com